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# FORGOTTEN REALMS

FANTASY ADVENTURE

**Part 3**

# THE MERCENARIES

*In the mysterious land of the  
Utter East a conspiracy unfolds...*



**Ed Greenwood**

## Forgotten Realms

### Double Diamond Triangle Saga: The Mercenaries

By Ed Greenwood

#### Prologue

Seven wet and bitter figures loomed up over him as he crouched in the grass, but the little man kept as still as a stone. Before him lay the curve of the Great Sea, its waves lapping fiercely at the coast of the Utter East.

The night breeze still smelt of burning wood and men, but at least the screams had stopped. As oily

smoke bid the last stars from view, the flames dancing amid the rocks below found the precious smoke powder deep in the hold of the Kissing Shark and flared up in fresh fury, spitting spars and embers high into the air.

The seven pirates who'd swum out of the wreck on Skelder's Rocks watched in grim silence as the night exploded. Trailing flames, fragments of the ship hurtled high into the air above the wave-scoured rocks— only to plunge, hissing, back into the sea again.

On the cliffs, the seven turned away. They'd seen their shipmates die; watching them roast was an additional thrill none of the pirates wanted to taste on this darkest of nights.

"Redbeard will pay for this," one of them muttered, as they stumbled off through the tall, dew-slick grass together.

Behind them the sea shook, and a fierce ball of flames rose up into the sky with slow, ponderous fury. The watcher eyed those retreating backs narrowly, but none of the seven flinched or bothered to look back. His mouth tightened into a mirthless smile. Well. It was no mistake that the old ballad claimed all true pirates found their deaths through fire, sea, or sword.

He rose, like a silent shadow, and slipped away. Unheeded, dying flames danced red and glimmering above the wreck— and one by one, the stars came out again.

#### Chapter 1

#### A Night at the Masques

Red flames danced and curled like hungry serpents, hissing as some fool tossed the dregs of his tankard their way. They spat and threw smoke and then blazed up again in the smoky hearth that dominated one end of the taproom. The infamous Tavern of the Masques was crowded to the very walls this night, for

it was the favorite refuge of the lawless wolves of the sea who called Tharkar their home port.

The city was a place of tight shutters and few torches, nestled in the mountains where Ulgarth and Parsanic meet and together run down into rocky, treacherous seas. Had a sober man been outside in the damp, dark night to raise a lantern and peer at the signboard above the main doors, he'd have seen the words Donder's Dancing Masques on a swirling banner carved beneath four linked black masques—but he'd have found no one in all Tharkar who still remembered Donder. The Masques was where nearly everyone in town came to drink and wench and boast and squabble—or they cowered well clear of it, especially on nights when ships without lamps or charter-papers came in. Four such ships were creaking at the wharves of Tharkar this night, and not far away, the sprawling bulk of the tavern, in its field of tallgrass, was bulging with thirsty, sweating, heartily belligerent pirates. Inside the heat was intense, the tumult of roaring voices was deafening, and even the burly, battle-scarred guards at the doors and weapon-check rooms looked a little overwhelmed. They'd be calling in the Daggers before this night was through.

A guest had to shoulder and shove to travel three paces, and the doors of the kitchens stood open to let out the steam. The only clothing the cooks wore was tied around their brows, to keep stinging sweat from streaming into their eyes. One man silently watched those glistening bodies wrestle food over drums of hot spiced fat and wine-sluced chopping boards. He sniffed the air. Around him the pungent, competing reeks of a dozen pipe-mixes mingled

with the smells of sizzling stuffed boar, roast almonds, mushrooms fried in herbed butter, stagshead soup, and fowl doused in wine.

The sailors were ravenous. Seaports were the only places some could get more than drink, thin soup, and gnaw-fists of hardbread or salted fish. Right now most of them were doing their level best to take aboard all their guts could hold—and often more—before the club-wielding "lammers" of the house dragged or frog-i marched them out into the dark, cool fields, where •they'd be left to lie snoring or moaning until morning.

The copper-topped bar was a crowded forest of tankards and strange bottles from distant, exotic ports, their vintners and brewers either unknown or legendary. More than a few beverages had been so doctored with dyes and sugar-powders by gentle hands behind the bar that their makers wouldn't have recognized them. It didn't matter; the guests were thirsty, and anything that could be opened and poured down a throat would serve. Tankards were being taken out to the tables in crates to avoid spillage in the crowd of laughing, shouting men—and the burly men carrying them were already looking wet and weary.

Ladies who wore only thin leather strips strung with tiny chiming bells swung platters of food from table to table with practiced ease, slapping at some sailors and stopping to dance or bestow kisses when coins were stuffed into their leg-bags. One of them didn't have to slap; she wore only the reeking, draped seaweed of a priestess of Umberlee, goddess of the sea—and men carefully left her alone.

She slipped through the tumult like a dark shadow, as pirates laughed and told wild stories and slapped each other and the tables with mirth—and in one dark corner by the fire a fat little man sat alone at a table. In the reflective surface of a brightly polished tankard, he watched it all. The heat thrown off by the hearth kept most of the weaving pirates from lingering in his corner. From time to time his dark,

glistening eyes went to a door nearby, but mostly he looked around the room, keeping his head lowered so his jet black hair hooded his searching gaze, and listened.

The tall tankard sat untasted before him. From time to time, when no one seemed to be looking, he emptied it into a corner. He smilingly held it out— with a handful of silver bits—to be filled anew each time the tall, tanned wine-wench sauntered by. They exchanged wordless smiles at her every visit. She'd taken her measure of his milk-white skin, dark eyes, and a certain air of calm danger that hovered about him. A pity he's so fat, she thought. Otherwise, he just might be worth an evening...

She glanced again at his fine-fingered, almost delicate hands, where they rested on knee and tabletop, sighed inwardly, and went on down the room, avoiding the hairy, groping hands—and hooks—of more boisterous patrons.

As the little man watched her go, the faintest of smiles touched his lips. If this had been another night, he might have been interested ... but just now he was hunting men.

The right men, to be precise; or women, if he could find them strong enough. He needed a few folk to aid him in a mission, folk good at skulking and swordplay. Pirates. He only needed a few—an expendable few— but they had to be the right few.

The sailors at a nearby table had been drinking steadily since dusk, and were beginning—one by one—to slip down senseless in their chairs. Soon the lamplighters would spot them and sling them out the door beside him, and the table would have new occupants.

Tankards thumped down on another table, hard by, and the watcher raised his own empty jack to his mouth to cover the slight turn of his head that would afford him the best listening he could get. Somewhere, someone dropped a dish with a battlelike clatter—and somewhere nearer, a very drunken pirate lifted his voice in tuneless song. Through it all the fat man listened without seeming to

do so.

"A few more runs of lumber and cart-wheels down to Doegan, and they won't need to hire our holds any more! It's foolishness, I tell you! Next, the only honest work we'll be able to find'll be building roads—and once there're no honest coasters left, they'll be free to hunt down all afloat as pirates!"

"Nay, there'll be war before then. That's what wagons mean—war, not cutting us out o' trade. You think Doegan, say, and Konigheim trust each other enough to build good roads betwixt n' between, hey? Think again, addle-wits!"

"Addle-wits yourself, Rulgor—it's full of compliments y'are this night, aye? Ill grant that could mean war... but then, the whole Coast seems always close to war: we ship no swords anywhere, now do we, anymore?"

"Aye, but there's always food for our holds—even when they hate each other or march to war on each other, folk need to eat."

"Living folk, aye," another voice joined in hoarsely, as a gaunt-cheeked salt bent over the table with a dripping tankard in his hand. "But I've seen—and fought—ghost warriors!"

There was a general chorus of rude sounds and good-natured curses, but the new arrival added hotly, "Some of yell laugh a little less some dark watch, when they rise dripping out of the sea—and reach for thee!"

"Get you gone!" Rulgor said sharply, waving a half-eaten wheel of mottled green cheese in the gaunt pirate's face, but the damage was done.

Already another seaman was muttering, "I've never seen no deader rise out of the waves, but I've seen one of the ghost ships, to be sure!"

"Ghost ships," Rulgor snarled derisively, voice rising, "ghost ships!"

Half a dozen rough voices echoed his ridicule as the lammers came, shook their heads silently, and dragged the

last of the drunks away. New arrivals who'd been leaning against the walls nursing their tankards crowded in to take the table.

"Ghost ships," whispered one straggle-bearded, one-eyed old pirate, in a hoarse, breathless bark that carried clearly up and down the room. "They rise from the depths on moonlit nights—I've seen 'em, more'n once!—and wallow along, mastless ... and unhelmed."

"Aye? Have less to drink while ye're on watch, and they'll go away," one laconic voice observed, and there was a general roar of laughter. Undaunted, the one-eyed pirate went on.

"Rise, they do, to ram luckless vessels—if the gods think it's your time."

"It's your time, all right—sit and stow it!" someone roared.

The tale-teller glared down the room with the one eye he had left, made the whirlpool sign of the sea goddess, and added, "Sometimes—not often—Umberlee smiles, and a ghost ship runs aground somewhere ... to make some lucky shoresmen rich with long-sodden gold and gems!"

"Oh, give off and get gone!" a handsomely-dressed man said scornfully. Charms of golden wire were wound into the small, jutting beard that curled from the point of his chin, and they bobbed as he sneered. The lamplight gleamed back from the rich brocade of his vest, but the shirt of fine white silk he wore beneath

it was sticking to him in six places from sweat. "In every port I hear such tales. They're good for little more than to make women scream."

"Before or after they look at you?" someone said sarcastically, and the man in the vest swung around with eyes ablaze, trying to identify who'd spoken. His snarls were lost in a babble of other voices, wanting to tell everyone in the room of ships of the dead that loomed out of dark nights, scraped past terrified pirates, and plunged as quickly back into the endless darkness, or rammed and sank rivals just before a sea battle, or ...

"Enough of ghosts, you loosetongues," the sarcastic pirate said, cutting through all the legends. "I've real news. You noticed, I'm sure, Orim Redbeard's Black Dragon at anchor out by the Jaws. And none of his crew here, tonight? Well, that's because a select few of 'em are skulking about us now. Hunting the last of Ralingor's crew—before those last few hunt them."

There was a sudden, tense silence, broken by someone asking, "What was that?" and someone else grunting, "Ralingor? By Umberlee's wettest kisses, what happened?"

Men made warding signs at the mention of the sea-goddess. Others, less fearful, snapped, "Aye: tell!"

Blackfingers Ralingor, for all his fabled stormy temper, was one of the most popular—and feared—pirates plying the Utter Coast. His deeds were legends, and he seemed one of the everpresent forces of life in Faerun—not something that could or should be swept away overnight.

The seaman with the sarcastic voice looked around, and then without further delay said flatly, "Orim Red-beard chased the Kissing Shark of Blackfingers Ralingor aground near Tenteeth Point six nights back."

"What?"

"Blackfingers? I don't believe it! His ship, aye, mayhap, but —"

"I've heard," the sarcastic sailor said with some satisfaction, "that Redbeard used fire-arrows, and burned all aboard her alive, as they cowered not daring to leave the hulk—for none of 'em could swim!"

Most of the men in the room were staring at the speaker. The fat man in the corner was looking at other faces—and at the man's last words, he was rewarded. The table that the drunks had been dragged away from was now crowded with seven drinkers—a dwarf and two women among them—who sat hunched forward, emptying two carry-kegs as fast as they could drain their tankards. Their faces had grown hard at the mention of the Kissing Shark, but bitter amusement



had crossed more than one pair of hips at the assertion that none of Blackfingers's crew could swim.

A rather less alert man could have tumbled to the fact that he was looking at a table of surviving Sharkers ... or rather, ex-Sharkers. The watcher covered his face with his tankard again and studied them more closely. This was his first chance to see more than seven wet shapes by moonlight.

Their leader seemed to be a big, heavily muscled Konigheimer . . . probably an escaped slave. He had the usual temper of such folk; just now, he was snarling something into his drink as one of the most battered and scarred seamen the observer had ever seen held on to one of his arms and whispered urgent soothings to him, while a moon-faced Edenvaler who had the hands and habits of a gambler clung to the other.

The bald dwarf had a nose and ears bedecked with rows of dangling earrings; the fat man tagged him as the whimsical wit of the group and looked at the others. There was the usual green youth hungry for

fortune and adventure, and the two women—one a battered barrel of a wench who could probably out-muscle many men in a brawl, and the other as beautiful as a high court lady, with flawless skin, large and striking blue eyes, brows that were even more arresting, and a long, silky fall of black hair to match. The watcher looked away quickly before she felt the sudden weight of his gaze. Then he glanced back and saw the empty dagger-sheaths on her forearms, and the war-harness riding on her slim hips.

She leaned forward with sleek grace to say something to the big man at that moment, and her murmured words calmed him visibly. Yes, this one was every inch a pirate too.

The silent spy listened intently, but the seven Sharkers weren't saying much. "We must stick together," he heard the battered veteran say, his voice like gravel rattling down a metal chute.

Aye, they were grim and guarded. Time to strike them with

fire and see what befell.

The fat man glanced around, saw the foppish pirate who'd been so scornful standing nearby, and noted how close he stood, face still flushed in anger, to the sarcastic tale-teller. The fat man covered a smile with his tankard, and kept it raised to hide his lips as he said—in perfect mimicry of the sarcastic sailor—"Perfumed sot, what would you know of swimming?"

"Ridicule my looks, would you?" the well-dressed, scornful man snarled, voice rising, and the watcher glanced up in time to see the fop sweep a long, needlelike poniard from his boot and drive it into the face of the sarcastic tale-teller.

The startled sailor saved his eyes with a quick sweep of his arm, and with the toe of his boot lifted his stool into his attacker's face. The fop staggered back-

ward, spitting out teeth and curses, and the sarcastic man produced a hitherto-hidden knife of his own.

Men backed away hastily, spilling ale from their tankards, and a chant of "Blood! Blood!" arose. As men began making wagers on the outcome of this duel, the fat man saw a lammer peer around some of the watchers and then hasten to get the doorguards. Bladed weapons were banned in the Masques, what with all the anger and rivalries and ready drink—and by the looks of things, these two pirates were going to demonstrate why.

There was a sudden shout from the audience as one of the men made a lunge, there was a flurry of stabbing and flailing arms and twisting, and bright blood glistened on the face and arm of the sarcastic pirate.

Some of the watching drinkers hooted, and there was a chorus of shouted suggestions—but the well-dressed sailor was in no shape to hear them. He was sagging back against a table, a dark stain spreading down the front of his breeches.

The sarcastic man strode toward his foe, face set and dagger ready—but a bottle came spinning out of the shadows and

struck his head sharply aside. He staggered and fell into someone's dinner—and the Masques erupted into battle.

All over the room men shouted and snatched at forks and tankards and stools, hurling and swinging and thrusting with all their might. The little man took hold of his tankard, just in case, and placed the fingertips of his other hand on the hilt of the slim needle-knife hidden up his own sleeve. Then he sat as still as his table, and watched!

His eyes were on the seven Sharkers as they thrust back their chairs and backed into a rough defensive ring, eyes wary. They were obviously expecting some of Redbeard's crew to come seeking them in this battle—and it seemed they might just find the trouble they were waiting for.

Two of the lammers waded into view through the fray, laying about vigorously in all directions with stout wooden clubs—until one of them went down with a hurled knife in his eye. The other fled, and a gong sounded.

By now the Masques was a chaos of splintering furniture, screams, breaking glass, oaths, and flailing fists. Bunkmates and men who were utter strangers were pounding each other for no reason at all but the drink and the pent-up anger of desperate men who spend their days in danger and discomfort and see a ready foe to lash out at.

The fat man found his feet, and the door. A man who wore a purple scarf on his head rose out of the fray with a cutlass in one hand . . . and a loaded hand crossbow in the other.

He aimed it at the Konigheimer Sharker—and from the corner a hard-thrown stool struck aside the leaping quarrel an instant before it smashed into the face of the man who'd fired it.

As he went down, startled faces turned toward the little man in the dark nook. He beckoned to the seven Sharkers and said urgently, "The Daggers are on their way! Hurry!"

Chapter 2

Decisions in the Dark

Blade glittering, the fat man waved at the Sharkers to follow.

He flung the door wide, looking right and left for lurkers by the door—and put his knife into the throat of the one who was swinging a club in his direction.

As the man toppled with a gurgle, a "blind" beggar who'd been sitting mournfully across the doorway scrambled hastily to his feet, his begging bowl spilling out a tangle of coins that proved to be tied to his wrist on fine threads, tossed his cane away, and fled across the dark field as fast as his feet could carry him.

The fat man ignored him, rolling into the grass without pause and coming to his feet as Redbeard's man was still sagging down the wall, trailing his club behind him.

The pirates exchanged looks. Sharessa saw Kurthe's mouth tighten; their leader liked nothing about this invitation.

The fat man might well be one of Redbeard's men himself, here to lure them into a slaughter . . . but the burly, cold-eyed Daggers of Tharkar were infamous for their brutality even in Konigheim. If a pirate port was to have any law at all—and if it lacked such temperance, neither Ulgarth nor the Free Cities would long have tolerated its existence—its Watch must be meaner and deadlier than a tavernful of drunken pirates.

Even the Tavern of Masques. The Sharkers watched as their companion went to a spill of broken glass, dug under it with the toe of his boot, drew forth some sacking—and from it produced a baldric bristling with daggers.

Their eyes could not see that the blades were tipped with something expensive that made a man sleep for hours. Even a watchman.

Or a hostile Sharker, if it came to that. As the fat man buckled on the baldric Kurthe made a reluctant decision, and the seven pirates came cautiously out the door, brandishing stools as if the well-polished wooden legs were sword blades.

"Over here!" the fat man hissed, waving. They peered at him narrowly as he hastened toward them, and Kurthe growled

with irritation.

"Who are you?" the beautiful she-pirate asked the fat man coldly as he came up to them.

"Someone who wants to hire all of you for a little pirating," he replied, "if I can get you out of here before the Daggers take us all!" He waved at the advancing soldiers, and the Sharkers fell silent. They could see the Daggers as well as he could.

"Just how," the dwarf asked, "Master 'Someone,' are you going to get us out of this little trap, eh?"

"Belmer's the name," the fat little man replied. "I can get you out only if you follow my orders. And the first I'll give is: put down the furniture, or we'll have the folk of the Masques after us as well as the Daggers:"

"Sound enough," the dwarf grunted, grounding a stool that was as big as he was. "Next?"

"Stay together in a group, and when—and only when—I say Arrows!' strike out at a Dagger. Seek to knock down, not to stay and slay."

The she-pirate looked up at the big Konigheimer beside her, collected his curt nod, and gestured to Belmer to lead the way. The fat man promptly broke into a trot, beckoning them to follow.

"It didn't take us long to find an overbearing captain again, did it?" Kurthe growled, as they hastened along one wall of the tavern and struck out across the field, ignoring the shouts of the Daggers drawing in around them.

"Be thankful and be still, Kurthe," the dwarf and the beautiful she-pirate said, more or less in unison. It sounded like something they'd said many times before.

"What's that ahead of us?" the youth asked uncertainly, as they hastened through the wet grass.

"A rain barrel," Belmer told him. "From the Masques. I put it there earlier."

"Why?" the boy asked.

The dwarf chuckled. "I think I know, Ingrar. Watch."

Two of the Daggers were almost upon them, swords drawn and shields up. "Halt!" one commanded, "in peril of eternal exile from Tharkar!"

"Good evening," Belmer said, moving suddenly to one side but not slowing his pace. His movement put the barrel between himself and the watchman. "I am Ambassador Droon, of Ulgarth, and I demand the protection of Tharkar's authorities for myself and my bodyguard. Do you speak for Tharkar?"

"I—" said one of the Daggers, momentarily nonplussed. That was long enough. Belmer came around the barrel with arms open and empty, but suddenly shoved at the man's gut. Staggering, the armored man stumbled backward against the barrel. Belmer grasped one leg and heaved, finding his job suddenly easier as the grinning dwarf charged in to take the other leg.

The Dagger went over the barrel with a crash—and another Sharker, waiting on the other side with one of his boots slipped onto his hand, brought it down with all his force on the man's helm. The visor crumpled inwards, and he gave the helm a swift turn to the side, to be sure. The watchman lay silent and still.

The other Dagger snatched at a horn that hung from his belt—but Belmer was already in the air, dagger foremost. The man tried to back hastily aside, lost hold of the horn, hacked wildly with his sword—and was spun around, to find a hard sit-down landing in the grass.

"The barrel!" Belmer called to Kurthe, as he rolled upright once more. "Over him!"

The scowling Konigheimer brightened just a trifle, and caught up the rain barrel as if it was a child's toy. It was empty. One end gaped open, the rain-hood missing, as Belmer had left it. It fit down around the sitting watchman with a satisfying crash, jamming the man's sword and shield in around his arms and pinioning him securely.

"Good," Belmer said, as calmly as if he'd been surveying the weather. "Now we make for that building there."

"The Ankle Bells?" both women asked, in scornful tones.

"I've rented a cellar there," Belmer told them. "The upper chambers are a mite too perfumed for my tastes."

"You're giving the orders, Ambassador Droon," the ugly, barrel-shaped woman replied with a shrug. "Lead on."

Belmer had laid his plans well. The Ankle Bells was perhaps the most crowded establishment in Tharkar after the Masques—and if Daggers were going to search it for eight ruffians, seen poorly through night-gloom and at a distance, they were going to have to break down a lot of barred doors, and disturb a lot of men and women who'd be rather irritated with them . . . and eager to demonstrate this. All of which would take time. Moreover, the damp, evil-smelling cellars weren't likely to be the first place searched—and one of them linked with the source of the smell: a smuggling tunnel that led right out under the docks, to a waiting skiff.

Most of the seven had visited the Ankle Bells before, and knew about the false door to misdirect hurrying Daggers, and another door that was held up only by twine, ready to crash down on anyone who tried to wrench it open. All of Tharkar knew that skilled actors could be hired there, equipped with enchanted masques that mirrored the features of folk when bid to do so, to provide a harried patron of the Bells with a night's alibi. The she-pirate Sharessa had even worked at the Bells

for a season, and—if she'd wanted to once more awaken memories that all too often burned in her dreams like black flames—could have told the others about the bed-canopy that crushed unwanted occupants, and the trip

step on the back stairs\_\_\_\_ But even her eyes widened at the password the fat man gave to the drunk slumped atop the refuse-heap—the one that called forth a dozen half-dressed "patrons" to enact an instant brawl that blocked the

street behind them. She'd have sworn not more than a dozen ship captains in all Faerun knew that word—and certainly not this little stranger.

She traded looks with Kurthe, and then with Rings. The seven Sharkers were beginning to be impressed by this bustling little fat man. He seemed to have everything planned, to know exactly what he was doing, and to set about things with unbroken calm— all of which were more than the wild-tempered, brawling Blackfingers had ever done.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cellar was as damp—and dim—as they'd expected. Broken bedsteads leaned against one wall in a tangle of riven wood, and the rest of the many-pillared room was a litter of crates, barrels, seachests, and stones fallen from the crumbling walls. Evil-smelling remnants of offerings to Umberlee—drowned rats and squirrels, floating in the seaweed-decorated bowls consecrated to the goddess—stood on plinths here and there, their presence guarding the building above against flooding and collapse. The Sharkers crowded in and leaned on several stacks of crates, facing the little man who'd spirited them out of the Masques.

He was perched on a chest well away from them, on the other side of the lone, hooded lamp that dangled from the low ceiling, festooned with spiderwebs cloaked in thick, wet dust. Dead flies the size of a child's fist hung frozen amid that gray fur.

The Sharkers shifted uneasily. The man facing them showed every evidence of being ready to sit calmly and silently watching them all night. Sharessa opened her mouth to speak; it was time to break the silence.

As often happened, the dwarf beat her to it. "Dispense with Ambassador Droon,' and give: who are you?" Rings asked abruptly, angling his nose up at the mysterious fat man like the beak of an inquisitive bird.

"Belmer," the fat little man told him flatly. "An out-lander



looking to hire pirates for a single task ... albeit a task that may take a season, or more."

"So," the surly Konigheimer told him, "talk. Just what task, and how much?"

The little man smiled faintly at the seven Sharkers. "To help me find—and slay—a certain someone ... who's not a ruler or lord of particular fame or power."

"Ah," Kurthe said, with a thin smile of his own. "A woman."

Belmer did not quite smile in return, and said nothing.

"The pay," the barrel-shaped woman with the many-times-broken nose prompted him.

"A chest of jargoons each, now, and a fist of rubies upon discharge," the little man told them placidly. "Two fists if we're successful. More—to be negotiated—if the task takes more than this season."

There was a silent moment of disbelief, and then a ripple of derisive laughter. Jargoons were poor mens' rubies, but worth a hundred true gold each even in a bad market; a respected and successful pirate might give his crew two or three each for a year's pay. Pirates could work five decades or more and not see more than one or two rubies to call their own. Gems were the currency of choice in Tharkar because false coins were so plentiful that prices were often given in both "true coin" and "fool's coin" amounts.

The fat man sat patiently watching them until the laughter trailed off into silence.

"Just how big are these chests?" asked the gravel-voked, much-scarred veteran. "And how do we know youH hold to your end of the bargain?"

"Take the lid off the barrel behind you," Belmer replied, rising. The unlovely woman gave him a suspicious look, but the moon-faced sharper was already peering into its depths. His hand came up with a coffer, and he looked at Belmer.

The little man indicated the chest he'd been sitting on. "For the jargoons: this size and brim-full of cut, unflawed stones.

As for the bargain—" He waved at the sharper to open the coffer, and the pirate did so.

"Writs," he announced, lifting them with careful fingers.

"Contracts," the beautiful she-pirate explained to the youth beside her. "Binding us both. To be registered with the Lord of Tharkar, I presume?"

Belmer inclined his head. "Four copies of each writ—for you, for me, for the Lord, and for a Pirates' Witness of your choosing. The payments already lie in one of his vaults, spell-locked to me."

This was standard; six of the seven Sharkers had signed writs with Blackfingers—so much safely hidden but worthless paper now. Brows wrinkled, they were already reading these new writs, moving their fingers along the lines. Belmer leaned against the wall, crossed his arms, and waited.

"That's a lot of coin," Kurthe rumbled, and his companions fell silent. "A great amount for one killing. Who is this woman?"

The fat little man smiled slightly again. "A woman, as you guessed," he replied, "from Waterdeep. Her name is Eidola, and I'll not divulge my reasons for desiring her demise. I need your aid twice over: I don't want to be on the scene to be recognized when she disappears—and I need you to capture her first. My hand must be the one to slay, after I am sure that the captive is the one I seek. I've been fooled about such things before." Silence fell once more.

" 'Find,' you said," Sharessa reminded him. "Where'U we look for her?"

"In Doegan," he replied. "We'll take ship together, in a vessel I've hired—before dawn. If we tarry, or if someone here refuses this mission and word of it gets around Tharkar, a later departure may prove . . . difficult."

"Care to tell us who'll be working against us?" Kurthe asked.

"Or what port well be heading for?" "No," Belmer replied.

The burly Konigheimer made a sound deep in his throat, and

then turned and barked, "Belgin?"

"I'd sign," the sharper murmured, looking up. The dwarf, only a line or two slower in his reading, nodded.

Silence fell. The Konigheimer looked around at all of his comrades and then—slowly, face set in reluctant lines—nodded.

Belmer went to the barrel and lifted out two larger coffers. One held a candle, several quill pens, ink, and a striker; he set the candle on a shelf bracket near his head and lit it.

Without a word, Kurthe stepped forward, wrote his name, and made his pirate mark. His comrades fol-

lowed, Sharessa first. In similar silence Belmer opened the second coffer, drew out a decanter of firewine and eight tall glasses (peering, the dwarf saw another four gleaming in the depths of the container), poured each near-full, and passed them around.

Then he took his copies of the contracts, and read out the names. "Belgin Dree." The moon-faced sharper in the fine vest and breeches nodded and smiled.

"Brindra Arrosee." The barrel-shaped woman inclined her head.

"Ingrar Welven." The youth lifted a hand, looking embarrassed. The finery short-term spell he'd hired for the evening was wearing off already—cheap work—and the glimmering and debonair cloth-of-gold shirt he was wearing was beginning to fade back into grimy, patched, much-torn leathers.

"Jolloth Burbuck."

The hairy, battle-scarred veteran lifted his teeth in a wry grin and said in his gravelly voice, "Call me Anvil. Everyone does."

"Kurthe Lornar." The tall Konigheimer nodded curtly.

"Nargin Olnblade."

The dwarf sketched a bow, his rings jingling, and corrected, "Rings, please. If ye call for 'Nargin,' ye may find me looking around for someone else."

Belmer nodded, and said, "Sharessa Stagwood." The beautiful she-pirate gave him a polite smile, and he asked, "Are you the one they call 'the Shadow'?"

Her smile broadened. "Yes," she said simply. The Konigheimer's eyes flashed once.

"You are agreed to work for me, and with me?" Belmer asked formally, meeting the eyes of each in turn. When he had the assenting nods of all, he signed the pile of writs and handed back two copies of each. "I go forthwith to the Lord to register these," he said, "and I suggest you seek out a Witness without delay; I'll expect to see you back here before this candle—" he inclined his head toward the one he'd just lit—"burns out. Anyone who comes back here with a Dagger, or uninvited companions, will die."

Shrugs were his silent reply. "I know that trust is not a thing easily won, and even less easily bought," Belmer told them softly, "but if it is to grow between us, I must warn you before we start that in my employ things may not always be what they seem." The pirates raised their eyebrows, but kept silent as they left the room in a wary group, cradling the writs as if they carried precious gold.

When he was alone, Belmer gave the candle a rueful smile, and left by another way that he'd somehow neglected to tell them about.

### Chapter 3

#### Fire and Water

"I've not seen this ship before," Kurthe muttered in the darkness, as they clambered aboard a damp deck in the mist, dunny-sacks on their shoulders.

"And you're not seeing it now, either, Longshanks," Sharessa said tartly from behind him. "Head to the right, or you'll walk straight into that—"

She winced, but a moment before a collision would have occurred, the pile of crates suddenly grew an arm and fended the burly Konigheimer off. "Watch sharp," Belmer murmured. "Companionway's just ahead."

"This'd be easier with a torch or two," Kurthe grumbled, feeling for the first descending step with his boot.

"No lights," Belmer told him, and was gone.

"How'm I supposed to find my bunk in the dark?" Kurthe demanded, reaching the end of the steps and standing uncertainly, facing featureless gloom.

There was a glassy rattle ahead and the faintest of mauve-hued glows, as someone—Rings—unhooded an Ulgarthan glowworm in ajar.

"Take any bunk on the right," the dwarf hissed. "This is the Morning Bird, a caravel from somewhere upriver in Ulgarth, by the looks of her."

"D'we have to crew?" Kurthe grunted, rolling his heavy bag of gear into a bunk.

"Nay—there's a dozen Tharkar wharf rats aboard, captained by a miserable cringing-guts who scares me white."

"Oh? Think he'll flee overboard at our first storm?" Sharessa asked. Neither of them had heard her enter the cabin; no doubt she was barefoot again, flitting about in the velvet silence that had earned the Shadow her nickname. Wordlessly Kurthe took her sack and put it with his own; she stroked his cheek with soft fingers and then stepped away.

"Wouldn't surprise me overmuch," Rings told her. "His name is Jander Turbalt, and if he's from Tharkar-port as he claims, I've never seen him before. Behner's already had to tell him to be quiet or his promised gold'll be fed into his slit-open belly coin by coin!"

The stairs creaked. "I heard that, too. Why all this secrecy, anyway?" Ingrar asked as he arrived, following Kurthe's pointing finger to a bunk.

"Our employer obviously doesn't want someone to know he's leaving town, dolt," Sharessa told him in kindly tones.

"Did someone think to bring drinking water?"

"You're thinking this'll be a long voyage?"

"I'll want it if I don't bring it, lad," she explained patiently. Belgin and the Anvil held up bottles, and she nodded.

"Good. I'm for the deck."

"Going to romance Belmer already?" the dwarf asked in teasing tones of mock disgust. "Can't ye even wait until we're clear of the harbor?"

She blew him a mocking kiss and made a rude gesture in the same smooth movement, and was gone up the stairs without a sound, a darker shadow in the gloom.

Kurthe gave Rings a snort of disapproval. "I don't like this," he announced to the cabin at large. Wood creaked as he sat on the edge of his bunk. "I don't like this at all. Creeping out of Tharkar like sneak-thieves instead of honest pirates and going off on some sort of mystery snatching voyage ... without even our favorite weapons."

"Well, that stands to reason," Belgin said. "None of us could get into the Masques again before dawn, with all the Daggers whoU be crawling all over it right now."

"Oh?" Rings replied quietly. "Why don't you open that strongbox over there?"

Belgin and Kurthe both gave him curious looks. After a moment's hesitation, the big Konigheimer got up from his bunk, took two quick strides, and flipped back the lid of the chest. All the weapons they'd checked at the Masques lay within. He snatched up his own dagger in disbelief, and tested its edge with his thumb.

"How, in the name of all the—"

The onetime slave frowned, and for a moment his eyes seemed to blaze like two red flames in the darkness. When he spoke again, his voice was low and far less furious, but still urgent. "Does it cross your mind, Rings, that our new employer arranged the fight and our easy escape from the Daggers ... and all?"

"Just to sign up seven salts who got out of the Kissing Shark by luck and some hard swimming?" asked the dwarf. "Only if he believes all those fancytongue tales about the lost treasure of Blackfingers. Which is more than I ever did." He looked around the cabin, and asked, "Well? What do the rest

of ye think?"

A thoughtful silence had descended on the cabin. No one replied. Kurthe hefted his dagger, said nothing, and went back to his bunk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Up on deck, the mists clung chill and heavy. Sharessa shivered suddenly, and leaned back against the mast, cradling herself for warmth. Well, at least it would cut the chances of prying eyes seeing them leave. The Tharkaran crew were a silent and sullen bunch; they'd cast off and were poling away from the docks even before she was topside. They shipped then-poles into sail-padded cradles in pairs, to be as quiet as possible; Sharessa thought she saw Belmer working alongside the rest.

The sweeps were already in the water, lashed to the sides of the ship by cables that the captain now un-spiked. The crew bent their backs with infinite care to avoid splashings; as the Morning Bird slipped out of the throat of Tharkar harbor, only the creak of wood and a faint foaming of water at the bows marked their passage.

Suddenly, without a sound, Belmer was at her elbow. "Nicely done," she whispered. "I've never heard so quiet a leave-taking."

"Not quiet enough," he said grimly, and pointed back at the docks. Sharessa looked along his arm and felt a fresh chill run down her spine. A signal lamp was blazing . . . and as she watched, a second flared into life beside it.

"Go below and tell your comrades to prepare for battle," Belmer added. "All are to come up on deck when ready."

Sharessa opened her mouth to reply—but he was gone again. She gave the signal lamp another glance, sighed, and did as she was bid.

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Silver clouds scudded overhead, hiding the fitful moon from view. The seas were calm, and the caravel was running easily out to sea under light sail, the sweeps long since

shipped and Tharkar far behind.

The Sharkers stood together on the unfamiliar deck, hearing the rhythmic creak of a ship rushing through the waves. It felt good to be at sea again—and yet wrong that it wasn't the Kissing Shark, with its cheerful chaos of rigging and boarding-pikes and hammocks amidships, with comrades lazily trading too-well-known jests on the moon watch. Sharessa stood by the lee rail staring out over the silver-touched waves. In some ways this long, wild night seemed like a dream— or the beginning of a nightmare.

A battle at sea; now that at least would be—she stiffened. Aye, there.

"Ship ho!" she shouted, pointing.

A ship was rushing at them out of the night—lying low in the water but running fast, its full sails dark. No lamps sparkled aboard as it raced out of the northeast, heading straight for them.

Belmer came sprinting down the deck toward the helm. The captain thundered after him, his untidy gray-white beard bobbing as he moaned in fear. A paunch larger than Belmer's wobbled along below it. Sharessa gave the panting man a look of contempt and drew her sword, winding her arm firmly through the nearest rigging to keep from being hurled overboard if their attacker rammed them.

The other Sharkers were taking battle stances, blades flashing back moonlight as they scrambled for safe perches. There were shouts aft, and the Morning Bird groaned and heeled over, turning abruptly; Belmer had ordered the crew to dip one of the sweeps and use it as a drag to make the turn swifter. The deck heaved and flexed under her boots, and Sharessa felt the familiar excitement of battle racing through her, making her tingle all over, and feel slightly sick. She grinned at her comrades and crouched low in case the crew of the onrushing ship had bows.

No hail came as it rushed down upon them, cleaving the water in its haste. It was straining under full sail; if it struck



them squarely, the Morning Bird would be broken into two and driven down into the dark water.

Because she had no better weapon to wield, Sharessa laughed in defiance as death raced to meet her.

The Bird was turning, groaning like a wounded seal. Somewhere aboard, wood snapped with a deafening sound, and a loose line danced across the decks. The dark ship came on, a carved black dragon at its

bows seeming to open its jaws to take them. It raced nearer... and nearer...

Sharessa heard despairing cries from the sailors. And then the dark ship was rushing past, hurling back water from its bows, and didn't seem that close after all. Sharessa peered at its flanks and decks, trying to make out a name or see what manner of men crewed her, but murky darkness seemed to cling to her decks like a shroud.

Out of that dimness something twanged and leapt, and unseen things whistled through the air toward the crouching Sharkers. Then the night was full of the snapping thrum of catapults letting fly, and points of fire suddenly blazed at the stern of the passing ship.

Fire arrows! Sharessa stood up to shout a warning, realized it was useless, and hastily freed herself from the rigging as firepots shattered up and down the decks. She saw Brindra swing frantically at one as it came right at her and then smash it to shards. Glass crashed on all sides, and Sharessa's nose was full of the familiar reek of lamp oil. She crouched low behind the rail, feeling for the storm ropes.

The deck was awash now, and strange clay balls as big as shields were landing in the puddles of oil. Sharessa cowered away and for the first time looked around for the Morning Bird's deck boats—those balls must be some sort of explosive. They slumped in the oil as if they were melting . . . and then she had no more time to wonder what they were, as the night rained fire.

Shaft after shaft whooshed low overhead, trailing bright

flames, and plunged to the decks. Where arrows met oil, flames rushed along the wet boards, and she saw her fellow Sharkers cursing and dancing about, trying to stamp out rising tongues of fire. She

had one glimpse of the stern of the ship that had attacked them, dwindling in the moonlight—and then an inferno roared in front of her and she scrambled back with an involuntary scream.

She smelt the reek of her own scorched hair as she ran along the decks, seeking Belmer or the captain. If there were buckets of sand or water to be had, they'd know where—

And then she saw what was rising ahead of her. Sharessa gasped and skidded, frantically trying to stop. She slipped in oil and fell heavily on her knees, still sliding slowly forward; she jabbed her sword into the decks to finally bring herself to a halt. And gaped.

With a sound like rustling leaves, things that were gray, brown, and mottled ivory were rising out of a shattered clay ball. Angular things, delicate and somehow familiar—bones! Human bones! They circled each other, awkwardly, the skull floating up to surmount an assembly of ribs that seemed to be missing pieces, but still hung together and moved as if. . . alive.

"Gods!" Sharessa husked, as the skeleton turned its head for all the world as if it could see her, and raised a scimitar—a blade of bone, she saw with a sudden chill—as it glided forward. Bones clicked as it moved, swaying and dancing in the air just above the decks. She tried to back away, and grimaced. It wouldn't be slipping in oil, as she was.

Beyond the advancing skeleton more bouncing bones were rising in eerie dances, and she saw Kurthe snatch up a sailpole and smash a skeleton into spinning fragments; his defiant snarl rose into a yell of exultation. Others closed in around him.

The Tharkarans were shrieking and fleeing for the rails. Sharessa heard a despairing wail and then a

splash, followed by another. Their terror was driving them to seek death in the sea! Something burst past her, heading for a wailing, running sailor, and Sharessa saw it was Belmer.

He was moving impossibly fast for one so fat. As she watched, he caught up with the crewman, tackled him, and they slid together past a grinning skeleton. A bone sword swung down and missed, and beyond it Belmer rose and slugged the man under him. When he scrambled up a moment later, glistening with oil, the sailor lay still on the deck.

"Sharkers!" their fat little employer roared. "Knock the crew senseless! We'll need them to sail, later!"

Flames were crackling and dancing over the decks now, the skeletons ignoring them as they danced forward, seeking the living. She saw Ingrar slip with a despairing cry, and Rings leaping over him with both axes flashing. The skeleton above the snarling dwarf flew apart, but she had no time left to see if its bones would draw together again. Her own skeleton was upon her.

She stared into its empty sockets out of habit, trying to read what her foe would do by looking at eyes that were not there. The bone sword cut the air with deceptive slowness, coming down ...

## Chapter 4

### Bonedance

Sharessa stood in a trance and watched the dancing skeleton swing at her, but at the last moment she shuddered and flung herself to the deck. As its blade of bone passed over her, she kicked out at the thing's shins, saw it stagger, and scrambled to her feet, hacking at its sword arm.

It was not a pretty attack. She slipped once, then again, and ended up clinging to the brown bones she was trying to sever. That grinning skull turned to look at her, only inches away—and in a sudden surge of terror Sharessa brought the hilt of her blade smashing down into its teeth.

Bone shards flew in all directions, and with a snarl of horror

she hacked and slashed, hewing at the headless undead horror until it flew apart. Bones fell and spun around her at last, and she staggered back, panting. The bone blade was still waving feebly; she stamped on it with both feet and ground it into the deck.

Another skeleton was dancing her way. Sharessa swallowed, hefted her blade, and went to meet it. Beyond it she saw Anvil cut down a skeleton with a rain of calm blows, like a woodsman chopping a tree; beyond him, Brindra laughed and hit one with a sail-pole, spinning the long spar in her hands as if it weighed nothing. The ghoulish thing flew apart around the wood like a smashed toy, its bones tinkling down the mainmast in a shower of fragments.

Sharessa dared watch no longer. Her own skeletal foe was moving to meet her, raising its blade—and then it wasn't. Kurthe had come around one of the deck boats at a dead run, lowered his head, and put his shoulders into the thing. Bones flailed the air vainly.

Sharessa ducked aside, holding out her blade, and sheared an arm off the undead thing as it spun past her, smashed into the rail, and flew out to sea in a rain of separate bones.

Kurthe grinned at her, clapped her on the shoulder, and set off up the deck again at a lumbering run, slipping in oil from time to time. There seemed to be only a few skeletons left, but flames were snarling every-

where now, and Sharessa's heart sank. They might yet die as drowned ashes.

"Shadow!" Belmer called, and she spun around. Somehow the little fat man had reached the stern again. Now he was trudging back the length of the boat with his arms locked around a squirming bundle that was larger and heavier than he was. "I need you to throw sand—the buckets are aft, with Belgin!"

As Sharessa nodded and hurried down the boat, she saw that Belmer's burden was the fat old captain, his eyes rolling in terror.

"Cease, fishbrains, or I'll cut off one of your fingers and make you eat it!" she heard Belmer hiss. Turbalt squealed in wide-eyed terror and vigorously, but vainly, tried to hit and kick his way clear of the smaller man. Sharessa hadn't yet reached the open hold where Belgin was when their employer shouted another order.

"Rings! Brindra! Stop amusing yourselves with those bonewalkers and tie this lout to his own mainmast! I haven't time to waste on keeping him aboard and alive just now!"

Sharessa heard the dwarf whoop as she reached the hold and saw Belgin's sweating face looking up at her. A line of buckets was waiting just below the Hp of the open hatch; he boosted them up to her. "Mind you don't get those buckets burnt!" he warned, puffing.

"Ah, the glorious life of a pirate!" she hissed, staggering and nearly falling under the weight of two full buckets of sand.

By the time she'd emptied her load, the other Sharkers were hastening aft to help—and Belmer was running along the rails opening all the sluice-chutes.

She thought she was fast on her feet, but by the time she reached the open hatch again, Belmer was there before her, calmly handing out orders again. "Buckets all—except Kurthe."

The Konigheimer's head snapped up, and his brows drew together.

"You," Belmer told him, "are going to pump. Sharessa can hold the hose. What we can't smother, shell wash off the decks into the sea, and it can burn the waves instead of us."

"And just what will you be doing?" Kurthe grunted.

Belmer gave him a cold look and turned away without a word. Kurthe stared after him for a moment, his eyes twin flames, and then shrugged and went below. The hose nozzle soared up through the hatch and crashed onto the deck next to Sharessa a breath or two later. She trapped it with her foot out of habit, her attention on Belmer.

Their fat employer was scurrying around among the deck

boats, doing something with ropes. Coils of hose slapped against Sharessa's boots, and she caught up several loops and started to trudge along the deck, heading for the flames. Sharkers were trotting past, lurching under the weight of their sand buckets. Sharessa barely saw them.

Belmer was lashing several of the deck boats together. Then he unchocked their rail-ramps, tested the pry bars that would propel them along those ramps and over the side, and nodded as if satisfied. He loped along the decks to where the flames were fiercest and came back gingerly juggling flaming debris, shouting at Ingrar to keep clear when the youth helpfully offered his full sand bucket.

The hose in Sharessa's hands jerked, grew heavy and cold, and then trembled in earnest as cold black bilge-water spewed from it. She hastened to a good location on the smoking deck and tried to sluice the burning oil

out of the chutes Belmer had opened—gods, but the little man had been busy—as the burning wreckage tumbled down into the bottom of one of the boats.

He was burning their only escape ...

Sharessa went closer with the hose. Could she strike him with the stream of water and stop his destruction? She looked back along the moonlit deck. No, the hose was not long enough, no matter how she aimed it.

Belmer came back with another blazing load, dumped it into another boat, and rushed away again. There were four boats, but she could see ropes joining only three of them. Sharessa looked up and down the decks at her comrades bending to take the buckets Belgin was handing up to them. Should she say something? Rush to stop him?

What was it he'd said, along with trust\*? Something about things not being as they seemed?

And then she let out her breath and relaxed; it was too late to do anything. He'd dumped something smouldering into the third boat—and bright fire leaped up!

Sharessa heard startled shouts from Ingrar and Brindra.

They broke into a run, but someone—Rings— darted in from the side and ran under Brindra's legs, and she stumbled, crashed forward onto her face, and skidded along the deck. Rings popped up from the deck to grab Ingrar's wrist and spin him around—and that was all the time their employer needed.

Belmer was fumbling with his shirt, unbuckling something . .. Some sort of hidden pouch, low on his belly? Sharessa peered, and saw something gleam in the fat man's fingers: a glass vial.

The fat man bent over the three boats in turn, sprinkling something from the vial, looking for all the world like an old crone adding poison to her cooking pots. Whatever that powder was, it made the flames roar.

Belmer tossed the empty vial into one boat and ran for the nearest pry bar. Rings was already moving to another, though it was clear he'd have to leap high into the air even to grab hold of it.

Sharessa had a sudden vision of the dwarf kicking his legs vainly in midair, like a small child dangling from a swing, and burst into hysterical giggles even as she dropped the streaming hose to the deck and ran for the third pry bar herself.

They sweated and gasped and strained together, and then Anvil came out of nowhere to take the third pry bar and heave—and suddenly the boats were moving, slipping away down the greased ramps with perilous speed, rushing and—

Were gone into the sea with a tremendous splash. They ran to the rail and looked down. Belmer spread his hands to shove Rings and Sharessa away from him. There was another vial in his hand. He unstop-pered it and then threw it, underhand and carefully— straight down into the middle boat.

The night erupted into towering sheets of flame, so hot and so sudden in their roaring birth from the pitching boats that

everyone at the rail stumbled back, cursing and clapping their hands over their eyes—except Belmer, whose hand was already shielding his.

Night seemed to become day as the flames went white and spat sparks, and through the blinding brightness Sharessa saw Belmer running along the decks again. She trotted unsteadily after him, shaking her head to banish brilliant afterimages of searing flame.

The fat little man moved like lithe lightning now, wearing an air of command like a mantle. He was bound for the mainmast.

"Jander Turbalt," he snapped, as he slowed in front of the white-faced, sweating man who was bound there, "I want you to up sail, rouse your men, and find guts enough to stay aboard! You're safer obeying and keeping close than leaping into the endless sea, witless dog! We'll be your crew—but I want us out of here, straight out to sea, as fast and as quiet as you can take us? Understood?"

The terrified shipmaster gulped and stammered and nodded his head. Belmer whipped out his sword, and the captain's noises of assent rose into a terrified wail. The small man slashed once, his steel winking in the moonlight.

The captain's bonds fell free, and Turbalt followed them to the deck, pleading and groveling on his knees. Belmer hauled him to his feet and said something soft, level, and menacing. The shipmaster scuttled away down his still-smouldering decks like a shore crab fleeing the claw of a hungry bear. Anvil and a grim-looking Brindra were waiting for him.

Sharessa smirked as she watched him dwindle and then disappear into the tangle of ropes and bound sails in the forethroat. Then Belmer looked at her and at the abandoned hose, and she remembered what it was she was supposed to be doing. She ran back to where the bilgewater still flowed. It was coming slowly now; Kurthe must be very tired.

As the ship turned again toward her former course and



started to pick up speed, leaving the still-impressive columns of flame behind, Belmer slowly strode the decks in search of places that were still alight. Idly he kicked a bone across the deck and out a sluice-chute.

Sharessa raised her brows. Impressive aim, too. Rings was stalking over to their employer now, and Sharessa drifted closer to hear what was said.

The dwarf stopped and planted his hands on his hips. Sharessa knew that gesture of old; it was what Rings did when he was talking to the captain.

A night after Blackfingers had met his final fire and water, the Sharkers had a captain again.

As the Morning Bird slipped away into the night, Rings squinted up at the man whose eyes were looking knowingly back down at him.

"I understand what ye're about," Rings began, "fooling them on the black ship, them as tried to ram us, into thinking we're ablaze from stem to stern, and going down. But what if they see us, now, and aren't fooled?"

Belmer looked back at the flames behind them for a moment, and turned to face the dwarf again. "Then," he said softly, and Sharessa saw the white flash of his teeth as he smiled mirthlessly in the darkness, "youll all have to start earning your jargoons."

## Chapter 5

### The Ghost Ship

"I've sailed ships before," Anvil growled to Brindra, as they stood shoulder to shoulder hauling in a mainsail line, "but by the looks of 'em, that's more than these Tharkar rats've ever done."

His barrel-shaped comrade spat over the rail, nodded grimly, and replied, "Our new master would've done better to leave them all behind on the docks, to be sure. I never heard of crew who had to be clubbed senseless to keep them from leaping to their deaths in the sea!"

"If I'd known we were going to be fighting fires and dancing

bones half the night, I'd've put away a few less tankards back at the Masques," Brindra said. "When d'y'suppose Belmer will think we've run far enough and let us all find a bunk? Or does he think his jargoons buy folks' sleep, too?" She yawned for perhaps the hundredth time.

Anvil groaned. "Don't do that, woman! I'm afraid I'll be wakened by my head bouncing off the deck after I fall asleep and then fall over!"

Brindra chuckled hoarsely. "That's better than not waking when you crack your head open on the deck, if you take my meaning."

"Ho ho," Anvil agreed with weary sarcasm. "Are we going to work the sails all night? I hear Kara-Tur's notautfwrffarofr..."

"Was that someone yawning I heard?" a dry voice asked, out of the darkness down the rail.

Anvil turned. "Belgin? What news?"

"Supper," was the wry reply, as Belgin and Rings staggered into view, a dented carry-cauldron between them. Its edges bristled with ladles, hook-jacks, and pans. "Some sort of soup our mysterious and all-talented master cooked up."

"He cooks, too? Gods above," Brindra muttered.

"So that's where he went," Anvil said, accepting a pan of steaming liquid. It looked thick and green in the moonlight, and when he stirred the spoon that came in it, pale lumps surfaced momentarily. He peered at them rather suspiciously as a hungry-looking Ingrar joined them. "Any idea what went into this?"

"Dead things," the dwarf said laconically. "Shrooms, sea turtles by the score, a crab he netted, and herbs— lots of herbs."

"Not like that powder he threw on the boats, I hope," Sharessa said with a yawn, joining them. "If I didn't think he wasn't quite crazed, I'd guess he intended to keep us hauling on sails and trying to outrace black ships all night!"

"No," Rings joked, twisting his voice into strangled mimicry of the gaunt sailor back in the Masques, "it's ghost ships ye

has to watch out for, lassie! Late at night, when folk on the moon watch are a-yawn, they rise out of the deeps, trailing bones and seaweed, and creep up on the leeboards of unsuspecting ships, seeki—"

"Oh belt up, nimble tongue of the Olnblades," Sharessa said affectionately, patting the dwarf's tanned bald head. She knew he hated that.

Rings gave her a glare. "You sound to me like a lass too sleepy to have any o' this fine soup, hey?"

"Give," Sharessa told him grimly, "or youll be wearing that ladle in a shorter time than you'd think—the handle in your gullet and the bowl out your backside."

Grinning, Rings passed over a steaming skillet. As Anvil had before her, Sharessa stirred and looked at it curiously.

"Sgood," Anvil assured her, licking the last errant drops from his thumbs. "First time I've ever really liked sea turtle."

Sharessa raised her own hot spoon, sniffed, and sipped. It was good, with a strange taste, like lemons, under the stronger briny tastes of the seafood. She dug in.

"Anyone hazard who gifted us with fire arrows and skeletons?" Brindra asked idly. "I'd like to know who we're running from—so I can accidentally run into them in Tharkar-port some night, with my sword unfortunately drawn."

The ghost of Blackfingers, furious that we've taken ship with someone else?" Rings teased.

That's not funny," Sharessa told him. "I liked Ralingor," she added, almost in a whisper, after a moment— and then wondered why she'd admitted that aloud. She never wanted anyone to know about the nights she'd crept into his cabin, so late that even Destra and his other wenches were snoring. Angrily she banished those memories, and the tears she knew they'd bring. Gods, why was she thinking this way?

"I never wanted to go to sea," Belgin told them, his voice low. "I just ran out of cities that my neck was safe in."

"Who doesn't?" Rings grunted, "what with the Five

Kingdoms the way they are—all double-dealing merchants, and nasty feuds wherever idiots aren't hurling armies!"

"Or fleets," Anvil grunted. "Which reminds me: unless Master Belmer knows some back way into wherever we're to search for this lady of his, we'll be turning south soon—into the very teeth of the Doegan Dogs."

The Doegan Dogs were pirates—freebooters sponsored and chartered by the self-styled Emperor of Doegan to hunt down the ships of Ulgarth, Parsanic, Konigheim, and anyone else who came within reach ... while the Emperor's Imperial Fleet kept busy in the south, fighting the pirates of the fabled Golden Lands (and, some said, other lands for Doegan to conquer). The Dogs made sailing dangerous anywhere south of the Free Cities, but then, they kept all the kingdoms

from rising in enough strength to wipe out the folk of Tharkar and other "honest" pirates, too.

"Kurthe swore some Dogs burned his ship," Belgin told them.

"What, in Port Halovar? Likely enough," Anvil grunted. "What made you think of that?"

Belgin frowned. "Your mention of the Dogs, of course," he said slowly. "I didn't mean to let it slip out, though."

Sharessa matched his frown. Why were they all spilling old secrets?

"So why are the Five Kingdoms 'the way they are,' as you put it?" Ingrar asked Rings. "I've always wondered."

Anvil laughed cynically, but the dwarf held up a hand for silence, scratched his chin, and said solemnly, "It's a secret."

"What?" Ingrar asked, eyes shining in eagerness. "Tell me!"

"Ah, lad," the dwarf said, a sudden answering twinkle in his eyes, "if I knew just why the gods make everyone who climbs on a throne crazy, I'd be Emperor of the Five Kingdoms, and not trading words on the deck of this hulk now, with ye!"

"That was well said," Belgin said grudgingly.

"Well put, indeed," Anvil agreed.

"Hmm," Rings pondered thoughtfully, emptying his pan, "I wonder if good Master Belmer has put a little something extra into this soup?"

"Of course I have," a calm voice spoke out of the rigging overhead, stunning them all into gaping silence. "Not to learn your secrets, but to keep you awake. Anyone still yawning?"

The Sharkers looked at him, blinked, thought about it, and said in ragged unison, "No."

The dwarf squinted up at the dark bulk that shouldn't have been able to get to where it was, so close above them, without at least one of them noticing, and asked flatly, "Why?"

"That black ship is still hunting for us," their employer told them. "I've seen it twice. That's why I turned nor'west a little while back—but they've found us again. They seem to be able to feel about—but not quite—where we are out here."

"Magic?" Sharessa asked, raising an eyebrow.

Belmer gave her a thoughtful look. "Only if someone aboard is working it," he told her, in a voice that was soft and yet had edges as hard as ice.

Belgin Dree was dipping a finger in the soup and sucking it appraisingly. "That lemon taste," he said slowly. "Your 'little something extra' wouldn't have been a purple powder, would it? From Chult?"

Belmer inclined his head and did not quite smile.

Sharessa stared up at him, fear stirring in her like a cold sea breeze. "You've poisoned us?"

The fat man shook his head. "Kept you alive," he replied. "I had the same soup you did. Yulchass powder, made from a berry found deep in the jungles of Chult, keeps folk awake and alert a day or so longer than usual— and they don't go under from the stolen sleep, after."

Belgin nodded. "And the price is loose-tongued honesty."

Rings stared at him, and then turned his bald head slowly to give their employer a sour look. "That's a trick I'd as soon ye

didn't play on us again, Master Belmer, if ye take my meaning," the dwarf said slowly. "There're certain things as're not done on the Utter Coast... poisoning, for instance."

"Oh?" their employer asked, and turned his head to match gazes with the sharper. "Is that true, Belgin?"

"Ahh . . ." The older man coughed, smiled a little weakly, and said, "What one doesn't know, it's been said, is often a comfort."

Rings directed an even darker look at his comrade. "No," he said slowly, "I don't want to know ... I really don't want to know."

"What I do want to know," Brindra said suddenly, startling them all with the break from her accustomed silence, "is who's after us—and why. Any ideas, sir?"

Her question was flung like a blade up at where Belmer hung in the shrouds above, but the little man only tightened his mouth and said, "I have my suspicions—but that's all they are. Spreading rumors that turn out to be false can be worse, by far, than keeping silent."

Rings grinned. "So, care to share your suspicions with us? Or, since we're wide awake again, a little more about this mission we've signed on for?"

Belmer did smile this time. "Not yet," was all he said. Before anyone could say anything further, a soup bowl spun down into the dwarf's hands—Rings caught it without thinking, spoon and all—and the shape in the shrouds above turned and was gone, flitting from line to line like a restless shadow, making no more noise than the whispering waves on the other side of the rail.

The Sharkers exchanged glances, and Rings broke the silence to ask them all softly, "So who d'you think our Master is, anyway?"

"A renegade royal-blood from Doegan?" Brindra asked, eyes bright at this romantic thought.

"An agent of Ulgarth, sent to stir things up in proud and increasingly dangerous Doegan?" Sharessa countered.

"No," Belgin and Anvil said together.

"He's from somewhere far from here," Belgin added.

"I can't be sure where—he's traveled some, and been in several courts or cities for some years at a time— but his accent says 'north' to me. Way north, beyond Raurin; mayhap a long way beyond." "

"That means he can't be a slaver out of Konigheim, raiding up and down the Coast," Brindra put in. "They don't hire outlanders for suchlike."

"Maybe he's one of the agents the Emperor-Mages of Doegan use," Ingrar ventured, "to keep folk from seeing their webs and gills and fish-skin."

Brindra made a rude sound. "You listen to too many tavern-tales, lad," she said, and pulled down her ragged shirt to lay bare one muscled shoulder. A few scales shone there, and in the armpit beneath was a shadow that might have been a thin, spiny span of blue, webbed flesh. The youth gaped at her, blushing scarlet, as she stared challengingly at him and slowly drew her clothing together again. "You think someone high and mighty needs to hide a few gills?" she growled at him. "From whom?"

"He's killed people," Anvil put in, "lots of them, I'd say. And he's gotten very good at it."

Rings lifted a finger from the bowl in his hands and put it to his lips. "He didn't have the same soup as the rest of us, mind," he said grimly, "whatever he told us."

"Maybe he was part of Redbeard's crew," the deep voice of Kurthe said, out of the darkness along the rail. His eyes glowed like two red flames; Ingrar stared at him, wondering why he'd never noticed that before.

The others shifted aside to let the big Konigheimer into their circle. Ingrar glanced around quickly; they weren't acting as if anything about the big man was odd.

"He fled mighty fast from Tharkar," Kurthe continued, hooking two thick thumbs into his belt, "and with pains to keep quiet, too. And he seemed to know a ship'd be

following us. It could be he did his captain out of some of Ralingor's loot—a treasure map, say, or a logbook—and made a run for it, hiring us to swing swords for him and die, if Redbeard ever catches up with him."

"But Blackfingers never—" Sharessa protested, and then fell silent, as Kurthe's familiar arm went around her hip. His fingers lingered, as they always did, on the little ridge there, that marked the top of the old sword-scar that ran down across her belly like a restless white snake.

What had they really known of Ralingor's wealth? He was always laughing and drinking cellars-full of good wine, and spending coins by the fistful. . . but where had he kept it hidden, and how much could any man have left, after pouring it away by night and day the way Blackfingers had? In shared silence the Sharkers considered Kurthe's all-too-likely scenario . . . and the silence lengthened as the implications sank in. And brought on chills.

"He'd make a good pirate captain," Anvil said. "But not one you could ever relax around. He's too—dangerous."

"Aye, I want to trust him," Belgin agreed, "but—"

"Trust," Kurthe echoed, twisting his lips to make the word a curse. "He wanted us to trust him—and men who bleat about trust, as far as I've ever seen, just do it to make you down shield as they drift close enough to drive a blade into you."

"So why'd you want to become a pirate?" Rings asked merrily.

Kurthe just snarled at him wordlessly, and stumped away.

"Not much laughter there," Brindra murmured. "Mayhap—"

Whatever she might have speculated was lost and forgotten before it was said. At that moment tattered black clouds drifted away from the moon, and in the sudden blue-white brilliance everyone on board clearly saw the black ship that had attacked them earlier, scudding along astern and off to the north.

The sailors of that dark vessel obviously saw the Morning Bird too. It immediately heeled over and turned toward



them, extra sails rippling as they were unfurled.

The Sharkers erupted in heartfelt curses. "We'd better find Belmer," said Sharessa, "and get our orders before it's too late to be doing anything but dancing with skeletons again!" "Keep low, ignore any firepots and the like, but try to roll those bone balls overboard before the skeletons rise up," came a crisp voice from overhead. The Sharkers stared up at the man in the rigging. How had he returned, without their seeing him? Had he been there all along, listening to Kurthe?

Moonlight touched Belmer, and they saw that his face was hard as he stared at the onrushing black ship. He indulged in no curses, but burst into sudden movement again, swinging down to sprint away across the deck without another word. Sharessa stared after him and shook her head, but by her elbow Rings said, "Ye heard the man! Along the rail, swords out, crouch low, hang onto the ropes, and wait. I never did think ye tall folk were very smart, standing around on moon-drenched decks practising being targets!"

"All right, all right, clevertongue," Anvil said. "You can lead the charge onto the decks of the foe when they try to board us!"

"A charge of whom?" Sharessa demanded, looking around. "There aren't enough of us to give half a dozen good blades more than a few breaths of sword practice!"

"Ah, but we have a weapon few of them can hope to prevail against!" Belgin told her. "Belmer."

"Ye gods!" Sharessa said, rolling her eyes. "He's a fat man who's hired us because his tricks'll only take him so far, not some hero to be worshiped!"

As she spoke, the ship beneath their boots seemed to shudder slightly, and eerie green light flashed up through all the hatches.

Chapter 6

Rising Faceless From the Deep

The Sharkers exchanged startled glances as the strange

glow came again, flickering violently.

Rings peered at the fast-approaching black ship, and so he was the last on board the Morning Bird to see it, as the very air around them began to glow, and swirl, and turn green.

One of the Tharkarans cried out in fear. The pirates heard the smack of an open hand crashing into flesh, followed by Kurthe's snarl of exasperation, and the thumps of the sailor's body slumping to the deck. In the silence that followed, the air slowly brightened, until the night around them was gone, and their world had become an unbroken dome of swirling, glowing mists.

"Make ready," Anvil said tensely. "A little mist isn't going to stop that foe from ramming us—and at the speed it was making, that'll come soon."

"Why doesn't Belmer have those dolts back there turn us again?" Belgin asked angrily. "We're practically holding our side out to be hit!" He clenched his fists in exasperation, and started to pace. "Why, if he was here right now, I'd tell him soon enough—"

A hatch cover under his boots suddenly rose, spilling the sharper abruptly into the rail, and Belmer's head came into view. He looked up at the mists and nodded, as if satisfied.

Belgin seemed to have changed his mind about telling their employer anything, so it was Rings who asked, "Hadn't we better change course or do something to keep them from ramming?"

"I've done what was necessary," Belmer replied, just a trifle sharply.

"How did you bring on the mists?" Sharessa asked. "You hadn't time to cast any spell!"

Belmer shrugged. "I had time to let loose a magic I paid someone else dearly for," he told her. "I'd hoped not to have to use it quite so soon, but..."

"We're somewhere slightly different from where we were before you called up the mists," Sharessa said slowly, "aren't we?"

Belmer nodded slowly.

"So," Rings asked breezily, "does any danger confront us in this—" he waved his arms at the roiling fog all around "—beside the usual mischance of running into things?"

"Well," Belmer said in dry tones, "there's always that." He pointed into the greenish mists at something large and dark. Another ship was drifting out of the mists to loom up over the far rail, bowsprit outstretched.

All over the Morning Bird folk cried out. It was going to ram them, it was an ancient carrack glistening with sea slime, it was a—

"Ghost ship!" Jander Turbalt bellowed, and his crew sent up a wail. "Ghost ship!"

The Sharkers stared at the vessel as it ran almost gently up against the Morning Bird and lodged its bows in their midships rigging.

A smell wafted across the decks: a channel reek of rot and old creeping mold and dead things. The sails of the ghost ship were sagging ropes of black, glistening brine slime, and its decks were furry with seabed plants and convulsing, dying crabs, strangling on air where they'd been breathing water before. Among them strode the crew: slow, lurching sailors who wore only rotten rags. They waved the rusty stumps of cutlasses at the Sharkers in eerie silence and shambled toward the bows of their ship, seeking battle.

Sharessa stared at them and felt her stomach rise up into her throat. They seemed to see her, but they had no eyes. Their faces were glistening white sheets of flattish, eaten-away flesh, all features long gone.

The faceless pirates shuffled tirelessly toward the Morning Bird, and from its stern the Sharkers heard despairing shrieks and splashes as more of the Tharkarans, mastered by terror, sought the cold embrace of the waves.

"This is what comes of dabbling in magic," Kurthe growled, his face as white as fine linen Rings swallowed. "I'd as soon

fight off skeletons as those. Master Belmer, can ye call off the mists and rid us of this?"

"No," Belmer said. He looked almost dejected as he added, "This was called to us by what I unleashed. There's no way to . . ."

He paused. As the faceless zombies shuffled forward, the Sharkers moved reluctantly to form a line to face them. The fat little man suddenly whirled around and snapped, "Fight and hold them—111 be as swift as I can!"

And with that he was gone again, his rotund body fairly flying across the damp decks. Sharessa felt somehow more hopeful as she stared after him.

A shout brought her attention back to the battle at hand. Kurthe had snatched up a sailpole and was battering the faceless things as they climbed awkwardly along the bowsprit of their vessel. One of them was smashed free, to claw at the air vainly for a moment before vanishing from view into the sea. Another crawled on, its arms broken to shapeless, dangling ropes of flesh by the Konigheimer's fear-frenzied blows.

The other Sharkers watched in horrified fascination until Anvil swallowed and started to trudge forward across the decks, his sword held out before him as if it was a shield to ward away the oncoming horrors. Rings followed, and after a slow moment Brindra trailed along in his wake.

Sharessa and Belgin traded looks, shrugged, and advanced in their turn, leaving only Ingrar, shivering and pale with fear.

Trembling and retching, the lad brought up the rear, more to stay with his comrades than because

he'd found any scraps of bravery. When the first of the faceless things found its footing on the decks of the Morning Bird and hacked at Kurthe with dogged, dreamlike slowness, Ingrar moaned aloud.

The Konigheimer laid about himself with almost frenzied strength, roaring his defiance, goaded by fear and—even

more—by the chance to finally lash out and hit something. The end of the stout sailpole splintered under the force of his blows, but the half-pulped zombies staggered on, passing him in a slow, tireless flood.

Anvil muttered a prayer to Tempus and another to Tymora as the first faceless one reached him. Then he swung his sword with all his strength, in a blow that half separated that featureless head from its shoulders.

The undead thing staggered, slid free of his blade, and without pause or any evidence of pain swung around to drive the crumbling fragments of its blade into his ribs. Anvil twisted away to make the blade slice away from his body—and it did not even manage that, falling away in flakes where a real blade would have sheared into the leather covering Anvil's flank.

The pirate did not wait to give it another chance. He grabbed his foe's sword arm behind the elbow and shoved, turning the thing completely away from him, into the path of the next zombie. The two dripping things bumped and struggled, and then crashed to the deck together as Kurthe smashed them both at neck level, and Anvil ducked in to hamstring them at knee level.

Even as the zombies fell and rolled, still dangerous, others shuffled forward to take their places. Sharessa and Brindra, white to the lips, were hacking and tumbling like women possessed; their usual tactics of fencing or causing pain were useless against these

smothering, unfeeling foes. In a moment or two more they'd be overwhelmed and clubbed down.

Rings spat a curse as he ducked away from a vicious hacking blow, slipped, and had to leap for his life. The sight of his closest friend in danger seemed to goad Ingrar out of his fear-daze. With a scream of defiance the pale, sweating youth charged forward, hacking and slashing like a man trying to hew down a tree, driving the zombies back into a huddled mass.

With a wolfish grin, Kurthe swung his sailpole, and battered almost half of the undead into the sea. Packed together, they could do little more than squirm as the Sharkers rose against them in unison, cutting and disabling them, and trying to keep clear of the grabbing, thrusting faceless creatures who'd already been cut down to the deck and were now crawling about underfoot like white, glistening dew worms.

Then a ringing voice made them all turn their heads.

"Great Umberlee, hear me! Great Queen of the Sea, heed this fervent supplication! Too long have we forsaken your true way, in our times far from the sea! Yet we return, and can never forget you! You, who rule all the watery face of Faerfin, and keep more secrets than any other! You, who quell storms and raise them with but a thought! You, whose greatness we cannot hope to comprehend! Yet we cry unto you in our time of need, and make what humble offerings we can! Take, now, all the gold this ship carries, every last piece of it—and all the glistening gems, too! More than the weight of a man—yours, if you but take back your faithful guardians, to rest once more upon the bottom and await other intruders! Hear me, Great Umberlee! Accept now this offering, I pray!"

It was Belmer, splashing himself with seawater all the while he spoke, and waving a green stone hammer whose sculpted head was split into two curling waves. At his final words he brought the hammer down hard on a sea chest, shattering it, and hurled the pieces over the side of the ship. Then he hefted the chest— though it was almost as large as he was—without apparent effort, and hurled it into the sea.

Water fountained up in a mighty crash—more than such a weight should have disturbed—and the Sharkers traded looks. All the gold aboard? Had he emptied their pockets and carry-chests, too?

Well, not their pockets, they soon made sure, slapping at

purses and coin belts as they backed away from the suddenly shuddering zombies. The sea had grown suddenly still, and a strange, deep singing was coming from beneath the ship, rising all around them.

Belmer's prayer, it seemed, had been heard. The little man was bent over the rail now, chanting the name of the goddess of the sea over and over, in a ceaseless drone that rose and fell like the passing waves.

Abruptly the zombies turned away from the living pirates and surged back toward their own ship, heedless of how many of them were crowded aside into the sea as they swarmed back up the bowsprit of the ghost ship.

A taut rope hummed and then broke, writhing across the decks of the Morning Bird. The forespar of the dripping ship of the deeps was moving again, backing out of the tangle it had created by ploughing into the rigging. The zombies moved more quickly now, withdrawing with little of the stiffness and awkwardness of their first waterlogged movements. Their eerie ship seemed to draw them with it, receding into the roiling mists.

It was sinking as it went, sliding back into the embrace of the waters that had held it for long years. As the Sharkers watched in awe and grim fear, wild bub-blings began around the vanishing hull, and the drab sponges and waterweeds on its decks submerged again.

"Sweeps!" Belmer snapped, breaking the somber, fascinated mood of the watching pirates. "Sharkers, man the sweeps! I need this ship held back from that wreck! It'll suck as it goes down and could scrape us open! Mover

Kurthe looked sullen, and set down his sailpole slowly, but his companions hastened. The danger was real, and a master was spitting orders.

With an almost human groan, the ghost ship slid entirely under the mist-cloaked water and was gone. Its descent drew the Morning Bird toward it, and the Sharkers put in some anxious, sweating moments of rowing with the giant

sweeps to keep clear of the faceless white heads of the last, stolid zombies, and the broken-off mast spars between them.

At the rail Belmer straightened, but it seemed Umberlee was not done with them quite yet. A wave rose from the calm sea with easy grace and swept across the decks like a long tongue reaching in across a sand beach. It washed away every last rust-flaked hilt and zombie finger, leaving behind a single shell as large as a man's fist.

Belmer strode toward this sea prize, but Kurthe, seeing his interest, snatched it up and put it to his ear.

The endless roar and crash of distant waves upon rocks seemed to echo faintly through his head, and then gave birth to a breathy voice. "Trust not what you see," it said, and then fell silent. Kurthe lifted his head to see Belmer standing over him with hand outstretched for the shell. He gave his employer a black look.

"Give," Belmer said simply, his face expressionless.

After a long, silent moment, Kurthe slapped the shell into the little man's palm, rose, and stalked away without looking back.

Belmer swept the shell swiftly to his ear, listened for a long, motionless moment, and then drew the shell slowly down again as he stared at Kurthe's retreating back. "Rings," he asked gently, without turning his head, "would you be so good as to bring Kurthe down to the cabin you share, as soon as it's convenient?"

The dwarf gave their employer a frowning look, and then trundled off in the Konigheimer's wake with a muttered "Aye."

"Is this . . . going to be a meeting between you two that we should know more about?" Anvil asked casually, his tone not quite menacing.

Belmer turned his head and gave them all a mirthless smile.

"No. It's a meeting between us all that I should have held earlier. Some things need to be said—and overheard by the



right ears."

Ignoring the puzzled looks of the Sharkers, the fat little man indicated the nearest companionway leading below, and asked politely, "Shall we?"

"The mists are clearing," Brindra said suddenly. "Shouldn't we be worried about the black ship coming to call again?"

"Not if we move quickly," Belmer replied, and swept past her to bound down the worn stairs. Exchanging glances, the Sharkers followed. What was the little man up to this time?

Their cabin was as they had left it—clothes hung, draped, or wadded up here and there, the chest that had held their weapons standing open in the center of the floor, the lamps out. Belmer lit one with a striker and waved at Belgin to use it to light the others.

As the Sharkers shuffled to their bunks, their employer leaned against the central pillar, arms crossed and one boot planted atop the empty chest. Kurthe shouldered down the other stairs, froze for a moment when he saw the assembly, and then went to his bunk, ignoring Belmer. Rings gave them all a cheery wave and followed suit.

"What's this all about?" Sharessa asked, before Belmer could begin.

He gave her a little smile and replied, "I've heard talk about who I may be, and what the mission I've hired you for might turn out to be. Both of those things are my own business, but I'm prepared to swear to you now—by the names of whatever gods you hold dear, and if need be as an addendum to our contract—that I never met Blackfingers Ralingor."

He looked around at them all, and went on. "I knew the man only by reputation, never had dealings with him or suffered losses from his activities, and I have never had any part of his fabled treasure. I am not seeking his treasure now. Nor do I have anything of his, nor the man himself nor any shipmate of his save those of us openly gathered here, on this ship or in any place that I know of. Our trip does not

concern the late Ralingor, and anyone searching this ship for his wealth is going to be disappointed. There is not a copper bit of it here."

Belmer looked around the room, meeting the eyes of each Sharker in turn. "I have no interest in hunting down spies among you, nor in listening to whispers as each of you tries to decide how many of the words I've just spoken were lies. So I propose that we all drink some wine—of your choice, from the cabin beside my own—with more of what I gave you earlier dissolved in it. This much extra of it will release you to sleep nor-

mally, not keep you wakeful as it has been doing—but it will make all of us loose-tongued and entirely truthful in what we do say. Ask me, after we drink, about all I have said, and what you hear shall be the truth; test it on yourselves first if you doubt me in this."

"Bah—you could be immune to this stuff," Kurthe growled.

Belmer turned his head to look at the moon-faced man from Edenvale. "Belgin? Tell him."

"If he is," the sharper told them all, "he's the only man living who's learned how ... and I've heard quite a few folk in Thay have tried to become so, by consuming much of the powder for years. They've all failed."

Brindra was on her feet "Lead me to the bottles. Fve always wanted to choose some really good, expensive wine, and have a handsome man serve it to me."

"Why, thank you, old barrel," Rings said airily. "I'd be—"

"I was referring," she growled, giving him a wintry look, "to Master Belmer."

The little man was looking at the ceiling. He sighed theatrically, and murmured, "Hundreds of pirates in Tharkar, and I had to hire these ..."

Everyone except Kurthe and Sharessa chuckled at that. Belmer waved his hand at the cabin door. "It's not locked."

"So," Sharessa asked softly, as Brindra strode to the indicated door, "who among us do you suspect of being a

spy? And for whom?"

## Chapter 7

### The Rats Come Out

Belmer waved a finger at Sharessa. "Not yet—we haven't had those drinks yet, and there's something more we have to do before I'll give you answers to such queries."

"And that is—T

"Search the entire ship together," the little man told her, "so that you all know, from your own seeing, we've no stowaways nor captive Blackfingers nor hidden loot aboard, before we start in flapping our jaws. Drinks first."

They did as Belmer had suggested—and if Rings thought that the powder that the little man stirred into his drink was a slightly different hue from what he put into theirs, he frowned and said nothing.

As Belmer and the Sharkers prowled around, watched by the puzzled Tharkaran crew, no one could fault the thoroughness of the little man's search. He peered behind every board that could be made to move, and lifted and looked under every moveable thing. In each room he paused and politely asked a different Sharker, "Are you betraying the whereabouts of this ship to anyone not on board, by any means?"

Each pirate answered no, in differing tones and degrees of defensive detail, as befitted their characters. Along the way, they all saw that Belmer had nothing on board but the clothes he stood in, a single change of clothing and a cloak, a dagger and some waxed cord, and a mirror to shave by. There were certainly no hidden rooms and no captives or gold. Their search ended back where it had begun: in the Sharkers' cabin.

"Why all this, anyway?" Kurthe growled.

"Despite the fact we've nothing worth taking, someone is after us, in the ship we've seen twice," Belmer replied.

"Someone able to follow us—and with all the changes in course I've made, I'd say they've magic to trace us. It's

either a spell cast by someone on board, or an enchantment already on some thing on our ship."

He looked around at them all, in the suddenly tense silence that followed, and added, "I've a means of knowing if a person bears an enchantment on their body. None of you, or the Tharkarans, are so afflicted,

either yourselves or what you wear and carry. There's little else that we've brought aboard, beyond a little food, and—"

He stopped suddenly, and frowned down at the chest that lay, open and empty, under his boot. Then, slowly, he bent to peer at it.

As the Sharkers watched, Belmer raised one open hand. Anvil knew what that gesture meant, and handed the fat little man a sword.

Their employer ran the blade delicately in under the chest and slowly levered it up, to look at its bottom. It was a stout and well-worn assembly of dirty planks; nothing out of the ordinary.

"Not even a copper piece did Blackfingers leave us," Belmer murmured slowly as he looked at the cabin floor where the chest had rested, ran a hand lightly over its boards, and then gently lowered the chest back down to the floor.

He looked inside again, and then slid his borrowed blade down to touch the inside bottom of the chest, bringing a finger and thumb up to grasp it level with the top of the chest. Drawing the sword out, he laid it against the outside of the chest.

The watching Sharkers nodded; Ingrar gasped. The sword point was a good three fingerwidths from the bottom of the chest. The carrychest bought from the Masques had a false bottom.

The Sharkers drew in closer around the chest, swords and daggers sliding out silently. Belmer held up a warning hand, looked carefully at the bottom of the chest for long, silent moments, and then set his sword tip against the end of a particular board.

He drove down and in, suddenly, levering upwards, his face twisting with the effort. The wood groaned and then sprang up.

A black mist seemed to curl and rise for a moment from the hidden space below—and they all saw something glowing faintly there, once its drifting concealment was gone.

Belmer plunged his hand in and drew it forth: a glowing sphere about the size of his palm, its smooth surface broken by an eye and an ear.

The eye blinked at them, once—before Belmer drove his borrowed blade into and through it. Dark blood spurted in all directions and flared into strange green fire that was gone in a howling instant, leaving the little man holding only a few motes of dry, dark dust.

In a cabin where a red-bearded man stood warily watching in the doorway, a lean man in robes was bent over a glowing bowl that rested on an old and much-scarred table, watching and listening intently.

A sudden groan, and then a confused rushing noise, erupted from the flickering waters in the bowl.

"The chest has been breached," the robed and cowled man explained, in his high, nasal voice. "It's—"

The bowl flickered, and from its waters burst a ghostly blade—the outline of a sword, slim and deadly, that thrust right up out of the bowl and plunged into the robed man's face.

The top of his cowl grew a momentary spiky protrusion. Then the blade drew back, dark and glistening, into the bowl.

Its radiance died in an instant—followed, half a breath later, by a splash as the robed man's face fell into it. He clawed at the tabletop vainly for a few moments and then lay still. The bearded man made a sound of disgust, turned in the doorway, and strode away.

Behind, in the dark cabin, there were rustlings as the rats came out.

The mists stole across the tireless waves like silver smoke in a hurry to rise and be off elsewhere, and Sharessa arose stiff

and aching. When she came out of the scudder hut at the stern, there was freshly warmed lemon-laced water to wash in, and Ingrar had a jack of hot herb root tea ready for her. She thanked him with a smile and a shoulder-squeeze, and warmed her hands on the cup as she went to the rail. The Morning Bird was running easily out to sea under low sail, Turbalt fussing among the rope coils and his weary-looking crew as usual. A rosy row of clouds was parting in the eastern sky, as the sun sent lances of its brightest light after their ship.

A fish jumped out of the waves, catching the sun for a single flashing moment. Sharessa smiled in the salt breeze, and looked back at the distant purple of the mountains. The Free Cities were invisible at this distance, as were the prouder, taller towers of Doegan to the—

She stiffened, stared, shaded her eyes with a hasty hand, and then flung down her jack unfinished and ran back to the stern. "Hey," Rings grunted, as she rushed past him on his way to the scudder. "Can't ye lasses finish at one go? It's my turn."

Sharessa reached the leeward corner of the deck, caught hold of the mizzen cables, and stared back along their wake into the roiling mists. Then she spat out a curse, spun around, and shouted, "Ship chasing us down! All up!"

Belmer stepped out from behind the mainmast and strode unhurriedly toward her, inclining his head in acknowledgement as calmly as if she'd commented on his hairstyle. The thunder of boots ascending from the tween-cabin echoed around him for a moment, and then Jolloth, Kurthe, and Belgin came on deck, the moon-faced Edenvaler struggling to hold his pants up with his belt, sword belt, and scabbarded blade clutched in an untidily flapping tangle in one hand.

"Who is it?" Kurthe snarled, rubbing eyes that were still heavy with slumber. He was unshaven and tousled, and wore the usual surliness that went with his rising. Sharessa gave

him a shrug, and pointed back at the racing silver mists astern.

Her gesture was hardly necessary. The ship behind them was low and dark and larger than their own, its maroon mainsail belled out with the wind. It was overtaking them at a furious rate, shearing through the silver tatters like a wolf ninning down sheep.

Turbalt gave a moan, turned, and ran along his deck, shouting orders to up the Bird's own mainsail, and do it quickly, by all the weeping gods! His fearful rush took him right past Kurthe, who was slumped against the rail in a doze, the first rattle of a snore escaping past the arm he was leaning on.

Belmer sighed. "There's no point in all that, captain," he remarked quietly, his words lost in Turbalt's rush toward the bows. After a glance or two aft, the crew reacted with frenzied fear, for it seemed they recognized the ship as well as Belmer obviously did.

Sharessa and Rings both looked clear questions at the man who'd hired them, as Brindra joined them at the stern. Belmer inclined his head toward the fast-approaching ship and said, "Yonder vessel is The Black Dragon; or 'Blackfinger's Bane,' as I heard them calling it back in Tharkar."

As the lips of the Sharkers tightened into angry lines, he turned away from the stern rail and walked back toward the masts. "Come," he said simply. The mercenaries cast quick looks back at the swiftly coming pirate ship, and then followed, hands checking the readiness of weapons without thought.

Ingrar, for one, half-expected their employer to fling aside a tarp and reveal some sort of magical hurler-of-lightnings or other weapon of doom, but Belmer merely took Kurthe by the elbow as gently as a nursemaid, and guided him, still stumbling in his morning doze, to a halt amidships, standing along the rail on the side where their pursuer would shortly

draw past. The rest of the Sharkers gathered in a line along the rail.

"Will they try to board us?" Brindra asked, voice husky with sleep and fear. "Shouldn't we make ready with nets and spears?"

Belmer gestured at the rail. "Stand here, and stay quiet, and watch." Something that might have almost been a smile touched his lips for a moment, and he added softly, "It's amazing how far one can go through life, behaving thus." He turned away, and then added over his shoulder, "Wake him, will you? Gently."

After a startled moment of silence, Jolloth nudged Kurthe and rumbled, "Arise, queen of slumber." He got no more than a murmur in reply and gave Kurthe a harder shove.

The Konigheimer came fully awake, with a rumble and a hard glare. "What're you playing a—"

And then he joined in the general tense silence on the decks of the Morning Bird, as the ship that might well bring their deaths swept down upon them.

The frozen snarl of the carved black drake on the bowsprit grinned at them as it came nearer and nearer, bobbing slightly with the seas. Along the rail of the low, rakish hull beyond it they saw pirates gathering: a motley crew drawn from the alleys and thieves' dens of half southern Faerun.

There was a gaudy-silked Calishite, one of his arms ending in a three-spiked metal ball instead of a hand; next to him jostled a bare-chested northerner from far Gundarlun, his blond mane longer than many a woman's. Beyond, a pair of moon-faced Bhutanans were shouldered aside by a grim, bristle-browed Tuigan, and at his side strode a bald, brown-skinned man whose forearms were scaled like those of a serpent—the first signs of the "eating disease" that only afflicts those born in the jungles of Chult. Golden earrings and belt buckles gleamed in plenty, and the hilt of a cutlass gleamed at every hip, most of them flanked by several



knives. There were razor-edged knuckle rings, too, and many a tanned face or forearm bore old, ragged sword scars. Hard, eager eyes and mouths that smiled without mirth lined up along the rail of the pirate ship as it drew alongside the smaller, slower Morning Bird. A lazy rat sunned itself on one tattooed shoulder, and its old and grizzled owner smiled across the water in a grin that displayed empty gums. The whiplike tail of the spiced snake he'd been chewing on dangled from the corner of his mouth as he tested the notched and scarred edge of his cutlass with one finger, watched blood well up, and nodded in satisfaction.

The seven Sharkers watched death draw closer, and tried to keep their faces impassive—but the hands of every one of them strayed to the hilts of their weapons, knuckles going white.

#### Chapter 8 A Fair Mornings Work

The strip of roiling water between the two ships grew narrower, as the helmsman of The Black Dragon turned his wheel so as to shear along the side of the Tharkaran vessel somewhere in the waves ahead.

The pirates lined up along the dark ship's rail pointed at Rings and laughed at his height, and whistled at Sharessa, crooking their fingers as sailors do to summon low-coin girls in taverns late at night.

She ignored them, and the taunts began in earnest. Kurthe shifted uneasily, and Ingrar, glancing sideways, saw the knuckles of the Konigheimer quivering on the hilt of his sword like a row of undead white bones.

And then the pirates suddenly fell silent. In their midst, someone was moving, advancing toward the crowded rail like a small mountain, shouldering aside those sneering, hardened men as if they were awestruck youths. The foremost pair of pirates parted, and those watching from the Morning Bird saw something flare like sudden flame as the bright sunlight shone between them.

A giant of a man lumbered forward to plant one booted foot

on the low rail of The Black Dragon. His leather-armored shoulders were as broad as those of two normal men standing together, his arms were as gnarled and stout as old oak trees, and the flame was the sun dancing on his shoulder-length, glossy red hair, and even longer beard. His lazily confident moves and stance left no doubt that he was master of that ship and all aboard it.

"Redbeard!" Kurthe snarled, sudden fire in his eyes.

The fat pirate captain grinned, showing teeth that had been filed into points—teeth that had eaten disobedient crewmen, Coast legends whispered—and ran a lazy hand through his belt-length, fiery flowing beard.

"Aye, Orim Redbeard stands before you, as lovely as ever," the giant said with a rolling laugh, and his eyes moved along their ranks slowly and shrewdly as it died away. "I'd thought," he added casually, when he was done, "that I'd see Ralingor and his navigator Drethil among you this fair morning—are they by any chance below?"

"You see all of us," Belmer replied calmly as he raised something into view and balanced it on his shoulder, pointed at the clouds. It was a ready-loaded crossbow.

"We've no cargo worth dying for, Redbeard," he added as quietly as if he was pointing out trail details on a map. "Sail on, with peace between us... or this quarrel will take you through the guts, whatever befalls us after."

"A challenge, is it?" Redbeard asked jovially. Despite his easy tone and broad smile, his eyes darkened with anger.

"Call it cordial advice," Belmer told him, his own eyes cold and steady as they held Orim Redbeard's gaze. "We've no quarrel with you ... but we could find one, if you make it so."

The pirate captain spread his hands as the freshening breeze plucked his beard out to stream like a flame-silk banner. "You wrong me," he said grandly, his face a masterpiece of mocking, injured innocence. Around him, his crew chortled. "Orim Redbeard is every man's friend—and every woman's dream!"

Amid the roars of mirth that followed, as Orim leered at them, Sharessa and Brindra raised eloquently and scornfully disbelieving eyebrows, but kept silent. At Sharessa's elbow there was a sudden stir as Kurthe snatched out his steel and mounted the rail of the Morning Bird. It was but a short, easy leap across empty air to the other ship.

There were whoops among Redbeard's pirates, and many enthusiastically went for their blades, but their enraged challenger never landed among them. As their swords and daggers flashed out, they saw Kurthe grunt, stagger—and suddenly fall from view back behind the rail of the Morning Bird, his sword tumbling into the waves.

There was a snap and the angry hum of a quarrel singing sunwards. The watchers on both ships saw Belmer calmly remove the butt of his crossbow from where his sudden sharp swing had brought it hard into the back of Kurthe's head.

Redbeard stared at the imperturbable little man for a moment and then roared out his laughter. After a moment or two more of astonishment, his crew joined him, shouting out their mirth as The Black Dragon slowly slid away, its larger sails catching the rising wind.

"Farewell, little tigers!" the pirate captain bellowed at the mercenaries as the sea took his ship plunging away from them. "I was looking for hardened veterans of the Kissing Shark, but I see only nancy-boys out for a sail! Try to stay clear of ferocious fishermen, now!" His pirates joined him in a thunderous chorus of laughter as the most feared ship on the Utter Coast heeled over under a sudden gust, and then leapt ahead through the waters, racing west with its crew whooping and waving swords that caught the sundaz-zle of the fresh morning.

Their last ragged shouts gave way to a silence on the decks of the Morning Bird as six mercenaries looked down at the sprawled body of their comrade, and then up, hard-eyed, at the lone man with the empty crossbow in his hands. None of

them spared a glance for Jander Turbalt, as the captain danced forward in an agony of anxious hand-wringing, looking fearfully from Belmer to the six mercenaries, and then back again.

As more than one of the Sharkers looked down at Kurthe for a second time, where he lay sprawled with his mouth open and his eyes half-shut, rolling slightly on the deck with the movements of the ship, Sharessa put one hand on the hilt of her sword and said grimly

to Belmer, "I think it's high time you told us just what our mission is."

Belmer nodded as coolly as if she'd asked him the time of day. "It is indeed," he replied. "I fear I've let events distract me from telling you what you need to know so that we'll reach Eldrinpar as a cohesive team."

"Eldrinpar, is it?" Rings muttered. "Thankee for informing us in so timely a manner, Master."

Belmer nodded at him, ignoring the dwarf's thick sarcasm.

"And in Eldrinpar—?" Brindra rumbled, prompting him.

"You must search for, find, and capture the woman Eidola . . . without attracting overmuch attention, of course," Belmer told them. "I believe I know where to look for her and can soon show you a portrait of her that I've kept hid—"

The small man moved then, shifting a sudden pace to one side. A dagger, thrown awkwardly and wrong-handed, clattered on the deck boards by Belmer's feet.

Its source glared at Belmer, and staggered to his feet.

"Kidnapping wenches be damned!" Kurthe snarled.

"Redbeard burns our ship, slaughters our comrades, and then laughs at us! And when I up and go for him, you scramble my skull for me! No man does that and fails to answer for it!"

Belmer lifted an eyebrow in what might have been a mild charade of surprise, as Kurthe spat on the deck in contempt.

"Damned outlander!" the Konigheimer yelled, voice rising as he shook his head to clear it. He waved a furious finger, and

then whirled to snatch one of Anvil's spare blades from the sheaths that crisscrossed the battered veteran's back.

He spun back to face Belmer, pointing with his borrowed blade. "You don't know how things are done here on the Utter Coast, do you? Well start in on your wench-snatching after we send a certain pirate down below!"

Still raging, Kurthe stumped away down the deck. "Crowd on that sail, curse you!" he roared. "You, Els-ger—and you, whatever your name is! Leap to it, now! We'll catch that ship, or I'll flog you until we do! Jump, you spawn of sleeping weasels!"

The crew gave him startled looks and then glanced at their captain, who was fairly babbling in frightened agitation. Kurthe stormed in among them, snatching sailors' shoulders and shaking them as a dog shakes rats in its teeth. "I'll have this boat running down Redbeard inside four breaths or know the reason why!"

He flung a howling sailor away into the mast. The man struck it with a meaty smack, bounced away, and fell among ropes as limp and senseless as a thing of rags. Kurthe took hold of the next man by the throat, and shouted orders into the man's choking, darkening face. "Crowd on the sail—the hardrunner too! And bring that bloody helm about! Now, or that wheel'll be dark with your heart's blood before I'm finished cursing!"

Tossing the sailor aside, he charged past the reeling man and bore down on the helm. "Are you deaf, man?" he roared, towering up over the sweating Tharkarian.

The steersman looked up fearfully at the raging Konigheimer. "But... but..." he protested. "My orders—"

Kurthe's blade flashed out. "Til give you orders!" he snarled as his steel darted down—but the wild thrust was turned aside by a gleaming blade that came out of nowhere, soft and swift, to meet his with deft precision.

"Keep to your course," its owner told the steersman calmly.

Kurthe stared along the sword and met the dark, dangerous

eyes of Belmer, looking back at him expressionlessly.

"You!" the Konigheimer shouted as his eyes kindled into two red flames. "All of this started when we took your cursed writs—and became, it seems, Master Soft-and-Sweet, your slaves!"

He smashed his blade free of Belmer's in a skirl of protesting steel and waved it menacingly, eyes narrowing. That, little worm, is going to stop right now. I'm going to see the color of your innards, Belmer— here, on this deck, now!"

Belmer shrugged and spread his hands. With another snarl, Kurthe stepped forward and swung with vicious force.

The small man ducked and swayed smoothly, and the Konigheimer's blade whistled through empty air. Belmer reached out with almost delicate grace and slid his own blade along Kurthe's side, slicing through the Sharker's stained old shirt and drawing a ribbon of dark blood along exposed ribs. Then he stepped away as if he had all the leisure in the world, in time to deflect Kurthe's frantic backhand swing down into the deck boards with a ringing clang.

The other Sharkers watched, stepping slowly closer, and the crew of the Morning Bird —all save their moaning, hand-wringing captain—clambered up to perches low in the rigging to see better. Sobbing with rage and pain, Kurthe swung his borrowed blade in another great two-handed swing, to chop the fat little man in half at gut level.

The steel bit deep, ripping into Belmer. No blood sprayed, and they heard no wet thunk of metal biting flesh. Kurthe's blade tore easily through soft leather, and cloth beneath it, and burst into view again, trailing a few

tumbling glass vials—and they all saw that Belmer's fat belly was a false thing: a front of padding and straps.

Belmer had taken the slash to stay close, bending over backward away from it, falling—no, he touched the deck with one spread hand, and in the same fluid motion used it as a spring to lunge back up, in behind Kurthe's swing. His

own blade sliced open the Sharker leader's shoulder and shirt together, and—as Belmer glided swiftly sideways—peeled the shirt away to lay bare the Konigheimer's whip-scarred back.

As the watchers gaped at that catlike attack, Belmer shot them a quick look and moved sideways again with the same gliding grace, unbuckling his false belly to let it fall. As the wounded leader of the Sharkers snarled around to meet him, the small man, suddenly thin and sleek, stood facing them all. Now, as Belmer fought, no one could take him from the rear.

Bellowing in frustration and rising pain, Kurthe advanced with his head lowered, like a bull seeking to drive an opponent into a corner, chopping and hacking in short swings that wove a deadly, oncoming wall of steel. Belmer took a pace back, braced himself, and then met those swings with his own blade. His strength surprised them all. When the blades met and shivered, and the sparks flew, it was Kurthe's steel that was turned aside, and the former slave who grunted with effort.

Calmly, icily silent, Belmer parried his furious foe, causing the Konigheimer's blade to glance wildly hither and thither. Each time it clanged too wide, the tip of the smaller man's blade darted in like the questing tongue of a serpent, slicing Kurthe's wrist here, and his forearm there. Soon the panting pirate was streaming blood from a dozen small cuts, and his sword hand was slick with dark blood.

Kurthe's fury mounted. He began to jump from side to side, seeking to startle his adversary, or use the momentum of his landings to jar the smaller man's grip on that deadly, darting blade. Belmer calmly slashed away Kurthe's shirt on his other flank, giving him a wound to match the first cut he'd taken on his ribs. The furious pirate balled up his own bloodsoaked shirt and swung it like a club, beating down Belmer's blade so that he could launch a low, deadly thrust right through the smaller man's belt.

The man who'd hired them all flashed a smile at him and nodded his head in what might have been admiration, as he sprang sideways like an acrobat at a fair.

Kurthe's seeking sword point found only empty air. Overbalanced, he couldn't manage the grip he needed to stop Belmer from tearing his own blade free. The small man twisted past the snarling pirate, spinning to rap him on the shoulder with the pommel of a dagger that hadn't been in his hand a moment before.

Jolloth and Brindra murmured in fearful unison at that as they watched—but when Kurthe and Belmer spun to a halt to face each other once more, the dagger was gone again, and the smaller man's knife hand was empty.

"Still hungry to know the color of my innards?" Belmer asked as quietly as if he'd been asking his foe's name.

Kurthe, panting for breath, only growled deep in his throat and leapt forward, swinging his blade again. The bloody rags of his shirt swirled from the wrist of his free hand; Belmer cut through them with a slash that sent a scrap of cloth flying out into the waves beyond the rail, parried Kurthe's cutting blade, and then dipped to slice into the Sharker's leg just below his knee.

Kurthe howled, hopped sideways in pain, and staggered back. Belmer did not pursue him, but stood waiting until his angry foe came at him again. A low, snakelike wriggle took the outlander out of the way of a mighty hack that would have cut clear through his shoulder, had it landed. Belmer calmly planted one hand on the deck, spun around on it, and thrust his sword alongside Kurthe's other leg, laying it open in a spot that matched the wound above his other boot.

Kurthe roared in fresh pain, and more than one of the watching Sharkers swallowed. It was clear enough that Belmer was toying with their leader, showing everyone that he could slay the Konigheimer whenever he desired. Death could not be far off for Kurthe Lornar, for all his long struggle



from the slavery in the upland orchards of his land to freedom on a heaving pirate deck.

"Give it up, Kurthe," Sharessa cried, as the two men circled each other once more. "He can—"

Kurthe shook his head violently, and waved her away with the hand that trailed the bloody scraps of his shirt. She fell silent as Belmer said, "Obedience, man of Konigheim, is sometimes the most prudent thing." Their blades met again, and Belmer sent Kurthe staggering back with a swift kick to the belly. "Can you see that?"

This latest humiliation seemed to drive Kurthe to the heights of rage. He chopped and hacked at the smaller man in a wild frenzy of blood, sweat, and singing steel. Belmer ducked and weaved and met him blow for blow, until the winded Sharker fell back, gasping for air. Blood was trickling into his eyes from where the smaller man's deadly blade had cut away a lock of his hair. He stared around dazedly to see if he could find the place where it had fallen.

As he stood, panting and glaring, Belmer's voice came again, still with that same maddening, unruffled calm. "Had enough?"

With a shriek of pure fury, Kurthe bent and snatched a knife from one boot, hurling it at Belmer's face. The smaller man struck it aside with his blade— but Kurthe, still crouched, had followed it straightaway with a dagger drawn from his other boot.

End over end, like a silver spark in the morning light, it spun toward Belmer's unprotected face. Calmly the small man reached over his own raised sword to pluck the oncoming dagger out of the air.

It quivered for a moment in his unharmed fingertips, drawing gasps from Ingrar and Sharessa, and a choked-out oath from Rings. And then, swift and sure, Belmer gave it back to its owner.

Kurthe's neck grew a sudden steel protruberance. The big Konigheimer choked, turned to his comrades with an

imploring look in his eyes, clutched vainly at his throat, and then toppled to the decks with a crash. He rolled back and forth, twisting his body in agony, gave a last, desperate gurgle around the deeply-planted dagger, and fell still.

Belmer stepped around the spreading pool of blood and strode toward the remaining Sharkers, the sword in his hand glistening with Kurthe's blood.

"Are you still with me?" he asked them calmly. "Or am I going to have to—" he glanced back at the dead man "—cancel a few more contracts?"

Five of the Sharkers looked uneasily at each other, and then back at Belmer, their hands on the hilts of their weapons.

The sixth, Sharessa, collected their gazes almost fiercely with her own dark eyes, turned deliberately to face the man who'd hired them, and said firmly,

"We're with you."

As Rings and Ingrar nodded slowly, she added crisply, "Landfall in Doegan, and a lady to find, was it not?"

A sudden smile broke across Belmer's face, and he bowed to her as one might to a court noble. "Lady, it was," he said.

Epilogue

Back in the rigging again.

The man who was no longer fat hong in his favorite spot in the shrouds and smiled at that thought as he watched the moonlight turn Sharessa's bared shoulders to pearly marble below him.

Her dark hair was a swirl of wet black flame in the waters of the deck-tub he'd pumped full earlier, as she bathed unconcernedly, ignoring him. Belmer kept as still as a stone, his eyes moving from her to the endless dark waves and back again. As alert as he always was ... and always must be. The magic his patron had given him for this task was almost all gone now. He'd had to use the prayer-token of Umberlee from Doegan that had cost him so much in Tharkar, and the box of mists. Kurthe's desperate blade had smashed two of his precious vials, but he still had the long waxed climbing-

cord bound about his waist, and the boot-heel daggers under his feet. Yet, as usual, his wits would have to be his first and best weapon in the days ahead, as he hunted down this Eidola, who must die. Who would die.

The six surviving pirates led by the lonely woman below were his second weapon in that hunt. He hoped the task wouldn't take all their lives—he hated waste—but after all, as the ballad said, all true pirates found their deaths through fire, sea, or sword.

As he'd had to slay the Konigheimer. Belmer sighed, stirred like a silent shadow, and slipped away aloft, climbing along the rigging like a surefooted cat.

In the tub below, Sharessa watched the mysterious man move away: Kurthe's killer, and the man who was all too likely to lead them all to their deaths—and shrugged away a stray tear. The gods can take us all, at any time. Why not go down fighting?

As the catlike form moved away from above her, one by one, from behind him the stars came out again.